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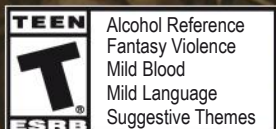
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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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I Still Believe

We are more than a year in since the return of virtual reality, and despite all the problems it has faced, I still think VR has a chance.

Seeing is believing when it comes to virtual reality. But even I, who has played and loved several games in VR, still have a hard time committing to the technology as it currently stands. Room-scale requires too much space for most people, the hardware costs too much money, and the software library right now doesn't have the payoff to make those investments worth it.

Regardless of platform, VR is struggling to find a foothold in the mainstream, and even my living room, given its current challenges. That doesn't mean the value proposition can't be changed or improved over time.

I still see a future where VR is the go-to gaming platform – we just have a lot of struggles to overcome before we get there. Hopefully, it doesn't all fall to pieces before it arrives. Great content is truly compelling on our current technologies, and it is easy to see how VR can transform for the better in the future. But we aren't there yet. Sure, the technology could be better, but it needs to get to a price point where there are enough hardware units in gamers' hands to reach a tipping point where the dollars enable developers to make software that can compete with the depth of traditional gaming experiences.

We explore the topic in depth in this issue (pg. 14), and it is worth a read if you have an interest in this technology that is still struggling through growing pains.

Enjoy the issue, and make sure to check out this month's cover story on *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* from Ninja Theory.

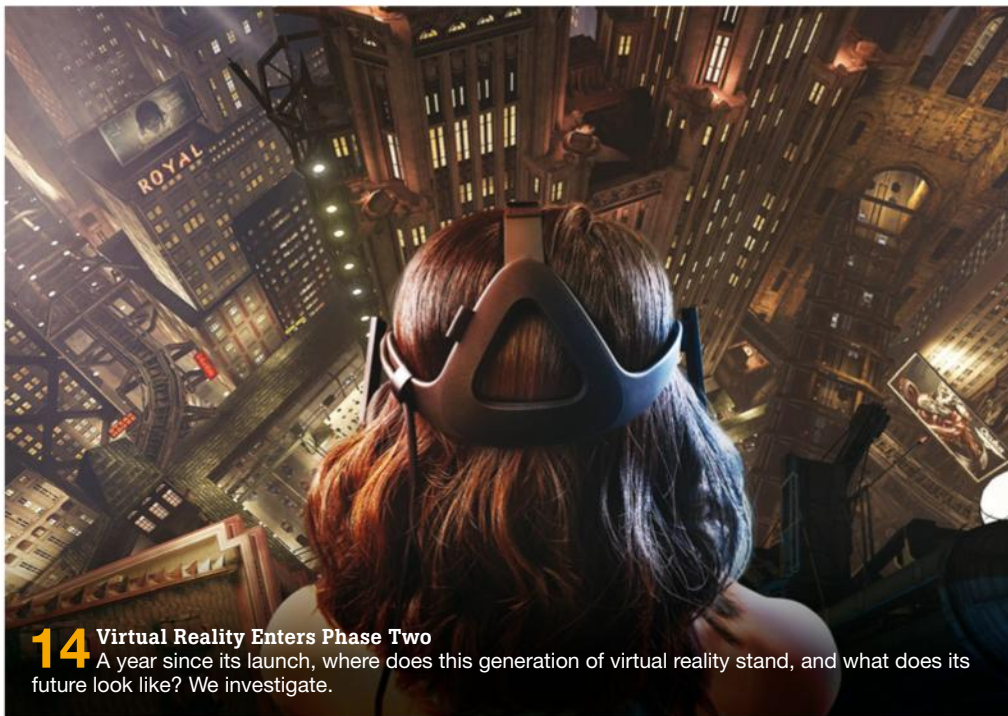
Cheers,



52 Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Ninja Theory's new title may look like a spiritual successor to *Heavenly Sword* at first glance, but *Hellblade* spends more time inside the head of its psychotic protagonist than it does on the battlefield.

by Ben Reeves



14 Virtual Reality Enters Phase Two

A year since its launch, where does this generation of virtual reality stand, and what does its future look like? We investigate.



24 Submissions And Subscribers

We spoke with the UFC flyweight champion Demetrious Johnson about his love for video games.



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One of the best video game documentaries is one you likely haven't seen.



28 Competing In The Underground

Everyone knows about pro Street Fighter play, but did you know about the pro Shrek Superslam community?



34 Impulse: The Indie Games Of GDC 2017

The annual Game Developers Conference is always full of new, innovative independent games, and we rounded up our favorites from this year's show.



38 Afterwords: For Honor

Ubisoft's intense fighter is unlike other online competitive games.



48 Playing With Portable Power

We issue the final verdict on Nintendo's console/handheld hybrid.



64 Middle-earth: Shadow Of War

Monolith Productions is heading back to Mordor, and we saw the upgraded nemesis system in action.



84 Mass Effect: Andromeda

BioWare takes Mass Effect in a bold, but familiar direction. How does it stand up to the original trilogy?

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44 Interview: Bill Rosemann

Marvel's next entertainment frontier is video games, and we spoke to the man making it happen.



39 Afterwords: Horizon Zero Dawn

We spoke with Guerrilla about the exciting new world of Horizon Zero Dawn.



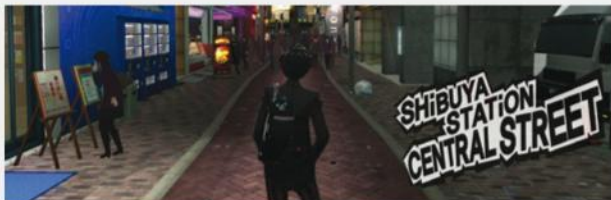
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Mortal Kombat's creators return to their dark take on the DC Comics universe for another fighter.



70 Mario Kart 8 Deluxe
Mario Kart 8's port to Switch has more to offer than what you already played on Wii U.



72 Sonic Forces
Can Sonic get back on track? For the moment, we're optimistic about what's next for the blue hedgehog.



88 Persona 5
After myriad delays, the highly anticipated JRPG is finally here (in English!) and it's great.



74 Hob
The creators of Torchlight return with a new game inspired by Zelda and Dark Souls.



75 Tacoma
We got extended hands-on with the next game from the creators of Gone Home.



77 Quake Champions
We were skeptical about returning to Quake, but walked away excited after playing a round.



40 Quick Hits: Good Games You Can Beat In One Sitting
Not everyone has time to sink 60 hours in the latest triple-A action/RPG. We rounded up a collection of games worth playing that you can enjoy in a single sitting.



86 Ghost Recon Wildlands
We spent lots of time in Ghost Recon's open world and are ready to share our review.



87 Yooka-Laylee
The Kickstarted platformer is officially worthy of the title "Banjo-Kazooie's spiritual successor."



91 Thimbleweed Park
The co-creator of Maniac Mansion returns to what he does best: point-and-click adventures.

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**“THAT GIRL”
JUST CHANGED
HER STATUS
TO SINGLE.**

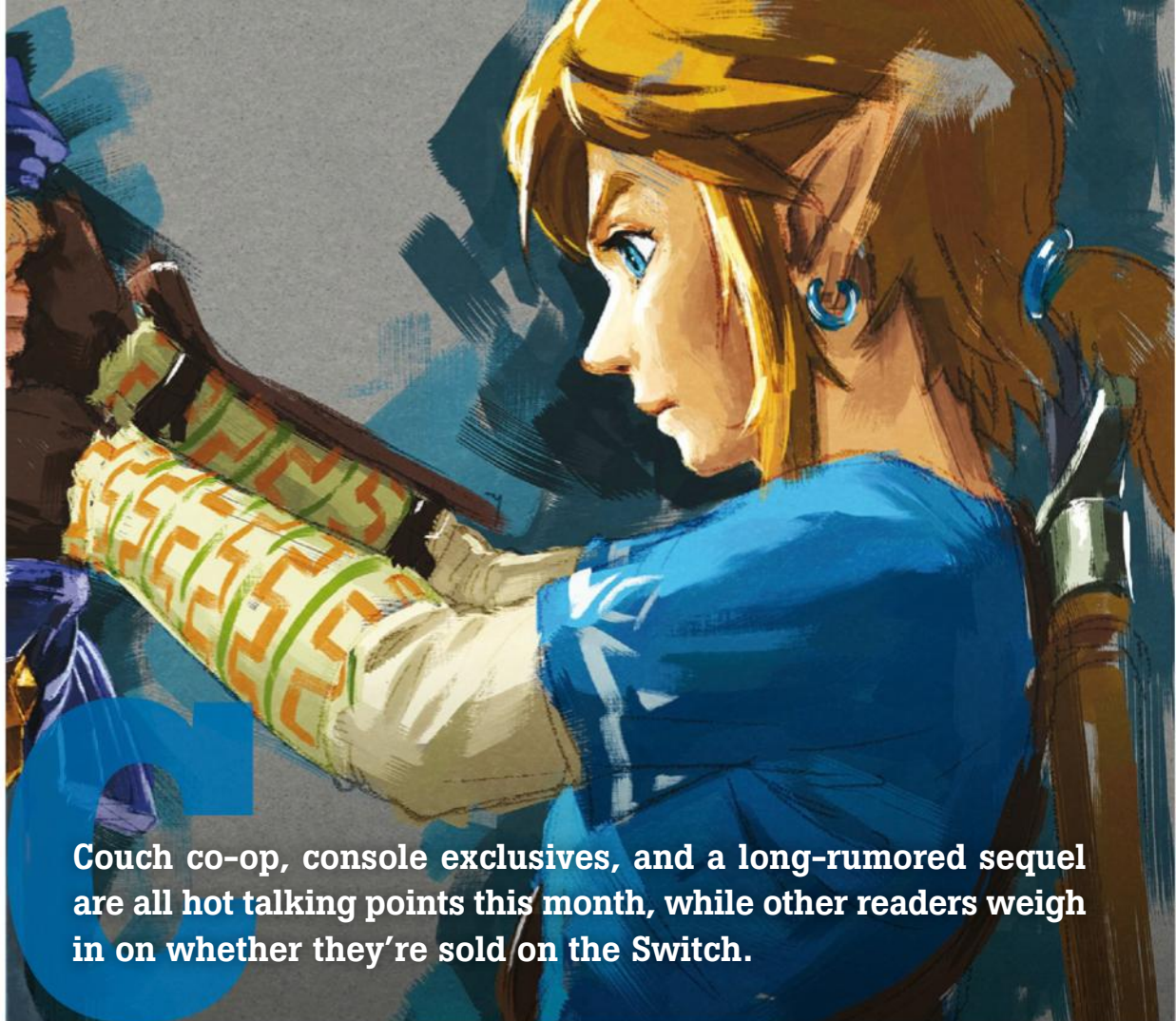
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Couch co-op, console exclusives, and a long-rumored sequel are all hot talking points this month, while other readers weigh in on whether they're sold on the Switch.

Breathless For Bokoblins

I really enjoyed the Breath of the Wild cover story and hub you guys set up; it was instrumental in getting me through the long waiting period. That said, I've been looking around and can't find any well-written articles about the series' bokoblins. There are some wiki entries, but they're pretty dry. I figure since bokoblins seem to be a big part of the game (they have their own Amiibo!) it may be a good idea to give them an exposé of sorts. Maybe show their evolution over time, their differences compared to moblins, and theories of how they fit into the larger timeline.

Jack Tokarz
via email

While bokoblins are indeed featured prominently in Breath of the Wild, they don't have a particularly intriguing backstory – they are just the main enemy type and are summoned when the Blood Moon appears. That said, if you're hankering for more Breath of the Wild content now that you've got the game, you can find spoiler-free tips, an Easter egg guide, insightful video discussions, and more at gameinformer.com/mag.

More Top 50 Fanfare

As usual, I really enjoyed reading your year-end Top 50 list (issue 286). I especially related to the many nods given to Uncharted 4. I just played through it with my wife, and wit is seriously a work of art. I know this because there were dozens of times that I stopped and panned the camera just to look at things in the distance, which were often places I had come from or would soon be heading. The views are just gorgeous. Props to Naughty Dog for their awesome work. I can't wait for the follow up with Chloe's story!

Darrin Matter
Birch Bay, WA

After reading the Top 50 issue and seeing all of the editors' Top 10s listing Inside, Inside, Inside, I decided to jump outside my FPS comfort zone

and try it. Not only is Inside one of the best games of 2016 (not just indie), it is one of the best games I have ever purchased across all of my consoles, period. Spooky, stunning, and infuriating in its addictiveness, I couldn't put it down for hours. You guys (and the readers) nailed it; good call.

W. Colen
Mississippi

Well this is a first: For once we're still getting compliments for our year-end coverage even after the hate mail has died off! Whether you prefer triple-A blockbusters or breathtaking indies, 2016 was a heck of a year for gaming. With games like Horizon Zero Dawn, Breath of the Wild, and Mass Effect Andromeda (read our review on page 84), 2017 is off to a pretty good start as well.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!





No Country For Old Co-op Partners

I am a 60-year-old gamer, and I play games with a friend of the same age. The problem is they make few games where you can just play on the same machine! Army of Two and Resistance are a few we enjoy. What happened to kids and their parents or grandparents being able to play in the same room together instead of separate homes? Wouldn't it be nice to be able to spend time together face-to-face and enjoy each other's company while you play? I've tried playing online, but let's face it – the younger generations are more advanced and faster. I'm not interested in playing online only to die immediately upon entering the game. Maybe if more people complain developers will add couch co-op to their games. I hope there are more people who agree with me.

Mark Wyno
via email

There certainly are, Mark. Given the industry's obsession with visual fidelity, many games simply can't handle rendering their detailed environments multiple times to accommodate split-screen multiplayer. However, that hasn't stopped gamers from yearning for more couch co-op experiences, and some developers are taking notice. During this year's D.I.C.E. summit, 343 Industries head Bonnie Ross pledged that all future Halo games will feature split-screen multiplayer, in large part due to fan backlash after Halo 5 axed the feature. Here's hoping more developers answer the call.



Exclude The Exclusives

I would just like to know why do game consoles still have exclusive titles? All it does is limit the potential audience and consequently possible revenue for the companies involved in publishing and developing it. Great games should be enjoyed by all, regardless of a player's preferred system. For example, Resident Evil 4 – a landmark title in gaming history – has been ported to 11 different systems. Horizon Zero Dawn, a great game with a beautiful open world, excellent combat, and compelling story, is exclusive to PlayStation 4. This bottlenecks who can play this amazing game, and could be easily resolved if it was available on other systems such as Xbox One and PC.

Thomas Devery
via email

We're going to go out on a limb and guess you're an Xbox One owner? Regardless, many third-party publishers have come to the same conclusion – reserving your game to a single platform simply leaves money on the table. However, Horizon Zero Dawn developer Guerrilla Games is owned by Sony, so the fact that interested gamers need to own a PS4 to play it is a pretty good selling point for the company's system. While missing out on a great game is certainly frustrating, first-party exclusives create healthy competition between the console makers and can help a system find its own audience – just ask Nintendo.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"1. Y-axis inverted or no?
2. Why?"

1. No. 2. We're not monsters. [Actually, Bertz is a monster who plays inverted – Ed.]

"What's the deal with putting crappy reader art in first or second place and the better ones in third or fourth?"

We're better art critics than you are.

"Would you rather play Roblox or Minecraft?"

We'll stick with Legos.

Reader Gibberish:

"Since the story finally being unfolded. Why the fans of the series, had to wait a very long time for the story to roll along."

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"Write more about Tingle."

Question Of The Month:

What would you like Sony or Microsoft to learn from Nintendo's playbook?

gi spy

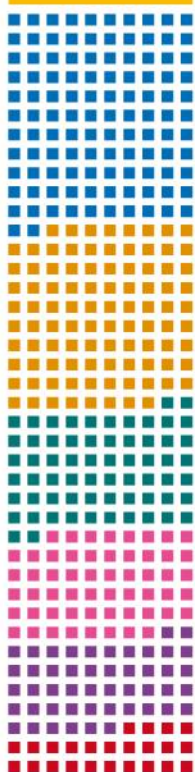


(Left) This month the G.I. crew traveled to Cambridge, England to learn all about Hellblade from the fine folks at Ninja Theory

(Right) We also met with Paul Fletcher, a Professor of Health Neuroscience at the University of Cambridge, who is advising Ninja Theory on the real-life characteristics of psychosis

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- Switch? Buy!
- Switch? Pass!
- Year-end Nostalgia
- Free DLC Praise
- Zelda Euphoria
- Cheat Code Requests



Flipping The Switch?

In issue 287, we asked gamers if they were planning on buying a Switch. When the dust settled, the early adopters just barely edged out the wait-and-see crowd. Here are some of their responses.

I plan on buying a Nintendo Switch, because there's just something about a new console launch that draws me in and makes me not want to feel left out. Also, Zelda.

Vinny Camp

I do plan on buying a Nintendo Switch. I have always been a fan of Nintendo, especially because Super Mario was what made me interested in video games. I want to support the company and help it compete with Sony and Microsoft.

Michael Hamilton

After finally trying the console with my own hands, I gotta say, I don't think I'll buy it anytime soon. The Nintendo Switch is just too small; it felt uncomfortable, and I have tiny hands. I can't imagine how bigger people are going to feel after an hour of playing a multiplayer game.

Balta Bueno

I won't be buying a Switch; I need to save up for Scorpio. Also, Nintendo always seems to fall short when it comes to third-party support, and honestly at 6'4", the Switch controller looks like it's about the size of my thumb.

Kelly Pisini

Left 4 Dead, Indeed

I have been waiting years to hear some real news about Left 4 Dead 3. All I have heard are rumors and speculation. I know I can't be the only one who has been "patiently" waiting! Do you guys have any real news about it? Also, someone should definitely update Playboy Mansion and release it on Xbox One – don't change the formula, just give it a little upgrade!

Patty Brown
via email

That letter certainly took a weird turn at the end there. As with all potential games in development, Valve continues to be tight-lipped. However, when asked about the possibility of a Left 4 Dead 3 during a recent AMA on Reddit, Valve founder Gabe Newell responded by saying, "Left 4 Dead is a good place for creating shared narratives." So that right there tells us... nothing, actually.



(Left) At this year's PAX East, Tack hung out with Nati "ZombiUnicorn" Casanova, pro CS:GO player LeXCS, Chase of Twitch, and Ellations' Lauren Hockenson

(Right) Tack also met up with Monstercat CEO Mike Darlington and popular Twitch streamer JoshOG



(continued on page 12)

Interview starts in 15 minutes



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Nailing it now

1



WINNER

1 Calvin Rosario

We didn't make the obvious Pharah/Gundam connection until just this minute.

2 Orion Woods

That's a whole lot of childhood nostalgia packed into one child's drawing...

3 Jake Fitzgerald

The Witcher would make one demented cartoon.

4 Andrew Parchman

We're so glad that Nintendo didn't go this route for Breath of the Wild.



2



3



4

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(Left) Kim and Elise chatted with Thea Artemis Kinyon Boodhoo, and Magic Notion founder Richard Franke at this year's GDC (Right) Meanwhile, Bertz reunited with Anki's Pete Nguyen, Hidden Variable's Nick Ahrens, and iam8bit's Jon Gibson





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- 40 quick hits: good
games you can beat
in one sitting





AL REALITY

ENTERS PHASE TWO

With the platform launches in the rearview mirror, publishers and developers look to dramatically expand the VR game libraries in 2017

by Matt Bertz

One year removed from the debut of the Rift and Vive virtual-reality headsets, the world has no shortage of opinions about the state of the technology. The most extremist of detractors argue it's dead on arrival, citing small install bases, lack of compelling software, and revenue forecasts that are continually revised downward. VR evangelists continue to say it's the future of gaming, pointing to the impressive rate of iteration and high interest level expressed by game designers, filmmakers, and technology leaders. So what's the reality? To get a better picture of the future of this promising new avenue for interactive entertainment, we spoke with experts from HTC, Oculus, and Sony, as well as several game developers currently working in the space. Read on to see the shape of things to come and learn about the most intriguing VR games slated for 2017.



When an exciting new technology emerges and fails to become a phenomenon overnight, it's easy to flippantly doom it to obscurity alongside other failed endeavors like 3D televisions and the Nokia N-Gage. But not all paradigm-shifting products change the world overnight. Apple sold only 1.39 million iPhones in the first year, and it took Facebook two years to expand from university campuses into mainstream audiences.

Virtual reality finds itself in similar territory. Research firm SuperData estimates HTC sold 420,000 Vive units by the end of 2016, and Oculus sold 243,000 Rifts along the same timeframe. With steep costs to entry, which for most gamers included having to buy a brand-new VR-ready PC or significantly upgrading their existing system, these small install bases were not surprising to those who have maintained all along that VR adoption is a marathon, not a sprint. Drop that introductory price point to align more closely with traditional new console prices, which Sony did with the PlayStation VR, and you start to see a much more promising rate of adoption. As of February 19, Sony sold more than 915,000 PSVRs since its October launch, which is right in line with the company's original internal projections of selling one million units by April. Maybe the sky isn't falling after all.

"A lot of people are like, 'VR isn't selling millions and millions of headsets yet?!' I don't think people realize how long it takes to figure these things out," says Nick Whiting, the technical director of AR/VR at Epic Games. "We've been on a very truncated timeframe. If you look back to where we were four years ago when we had the DK1 class headsets, which were rotational only, and we were struggling to make it hit 60

frames per second or 75 frames per second with DK2. Just the fact we can render stuff that looks halfway decent at that type of speed really took an overhaul in our thinking on how we make games. Games were just getting used to doing 60 frames per second on 1080p televisions, much less 75 or 90 frames per second and 2160x1200 and then oversampling that 140 percent. We've come a long way to push the kind of fidelity that we're doing in such a short amount of time. The fact that VR looks as good as it does right now is just a testament to all the hard work that people have put in on that."

All three platforms have momentum of different kinds moving into year two. By far the most popular option for consumers, Sony can't keep PSVRs stocked on retail shelves. "We're cranking up production to meet demand, because if you've been out to a store recently you've probably found you can't find these anywhere," says Sony Interactive Entertainment America president Shawn Layden. "We want to dial up to feed that need."

VR developers named the HTC Vive their preferred headset in a recent GDC poll, making it the lead platform for most VR titles in development. Oculus undoubtedly had a turbulent first year, facing a public relations disaster when founder Palmer Luckey admitted to funding an organization responsible for creating several meme maligning Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential election and then being ordered to pay a \$500 million settlement to Bethesda over a broken NDA. But the company also rolled out its impressive Touch motion controllers and just dropped the price for a Rift/Touch bundle by \$200 to \$598. Combined with the new price, the strong first-party game line-up led by titles

like *Wilson's Heart* and *From Other Suns* (see The Virtual Horizon sidebar) could drive more rapid adoption for Rift.

Price drops and developer praise are great, but these systems ultimately need strong libraries with compelling games to drive success. Not many people beyond early adopters and technology aficionados will drop half a grand for a platform with no must-play titles.

WHERE ARE THE GAMER'S GAMES?

One of the primary questions we hear from early adopters and those who have tried out the VR headsets is, "Yeah, this tech is cool, but where are the games?" Outside of outliers like *Resident Evil 7*, the clear majority of VR titles offered on the marketplaces are smaller, arcade-like experiences that speak to the potential of the medium but don't offer much depth or replay value.

All the virtual-reality developers and platform holders we spoke to are keenly aware of this problem, and expressed confidence that the next two years will rectify this shortcoming. Many pointed to this problem existing on most traditional console launches as well, with the Nintendo Switch being the most recent example.

Oculus VP of content Jason Rubin says lack of development time on the platforms is a key factor in why so few long-form virtual-reality games are available right now. "We didn't give dev kits out until two years ago," Rubin says. "Even an *Uncharted* or a *Call of Duty* takes longer than that to make. Even if they started [a triple-A project] the day we gave them consoles they wouldn't be done with it today."

Outside of Capcom and Ubisoft, which has already shipped two VR games and has a third due out in May, most of the major publishers have been hesitant to commit to larger-scale virtual-reality projects. Warner Bros. made a brief narrative experience with *Batman: Arkham VR* for PSVR, which is now launching for Rift and Vive as well. EA launched a small VR action sequence that put you in the cockpit of an X-Wing that was free for anyone who purchased *Star Wars Battlefront*. Take-Two only has a brief NBA 2K VR experience to its name. These pragmatic approaches have led to skepticism about the platforms' promise for big-budget games. Epic's Whiting thinks the issue is more complicated than big publishers simply not believing there is a market for them there.

"One of the things I like to point out is before the hardware launch, all the major players – Sony, Oculus, and HTC – really held their release dates and pricing models close to the chest until the last minute," Whiting says. "And because of that, a lot of the traditional funding vehicles for what you would call triple-A content were very hesitant to jump in. Game publishers, they don't know what the market is and they can't make any projections because they don't know what the price point and release date is, so they were very hesitant to fund projects at that early stage."

For better or worse, the lack of major publishing initiatives has left independent studios like *Insomniac* and *Gunfire Games* to lead the development charge on a platform. Many quickly learned what worked before in the traditional

Clearing Virtual Hurdles

Virtual-reality studios have come a long way since they first got development kits a few years ago. While many early demos left us woozy, very few demos of upcoming games give us motion sickness and most have natural, easy-to-understand controls and ways to interact with the worlds. That isn't to say all the groundwork is in place for virtual-reality standards. Several major hurdles still exist. Here are the three we heard the most about from developers:

» Locomotion

Moving a character while in a first-person perspective is still the biggest issue facing VR developers. Simply porting over the analog stick solution from console games isn't plausible, since making a character move while your body is stationary in real-life is the recipe for motion sickness. Right now developers have several active workarounds, such as teleportation, but it's far from ideal. "I think there's still some room to go there, but the sad thing is if you mess it up you make people sick, and I think that makes people very gun-shy about experimenting and getting a little too crazy with their ideas," says Nick Whiting, technical director of AR/VR at Epic Games. "But I think that's one of the biggest hurdles because it limits the type of experience you play. Game are all about that power fantasy, and you want to do extreme stuff you can't do in real life. But unfortunately, even if you were able to do those things in real life you would get sick. Even fighter pilots tend to get a little woozy sometimes, and they're trained for it. In VR if you're just some average user you have no hope of standing an experience like that."

» Hand Tracking

Motion controls have come a long way since the debut of the Wii, but developers still have some learning to do when it comes to tracking a player's hand in a 3D space. "The act of trying to grab an object and make that feel natural when you already have something in your hand is a surprisingly difficult problem," Whiting says. "We spent a couple weeks on

Bullet Train just trying to get that alone and it was just a matter of people when they grab an object you can grab it from the top, you can grab it from the side, there are a lot of different hand positions they can use. And you don't have a lot of those depth cues like you have in the real world, where the lighting changes very subtly as you come close to it and you kind of feel the static charge of the object you are trying to grab and you can have a lot of reactions based on the perception of your hands grabbing an object. You don't have that in VR, because you have something in your hands."

» Virtual Presence

When you place a player into a virtual-reality environment, their vision and hearing senses are key to making it a believable place. Rendering techniques can help sharpen the image of the world around them, but audio also plays a critical role to bringing a setting to life. "We're still working on understanding what's the role of 3D audio in a VR experience, and how do we use that to help guide the player through the adventure if you will," says Sony Interactive Entertainment America president Shawn Layden. "I think the kind of tactics or game-design executions that live comfortably in the 10-foot experience in television have to be modified or adjusted or replaced sometimes in a VR experience. We're still learning so much all the time. It's like we just introduced new console technology it feels like. I think that's why developers are so excited about it, because it allows them to do so many new things."

game space doesn't necessarily work in VR; designing a game experience where the player is essentially in the game takes a new approach to design.

"We are all still figuring out what a game in VR means," says Insomniac Games CEO Ted Price. "What we don't want to do is fall into the trap of falling on the experiences we had the last 20 years and bringing the same thing to people will VR window dressing. We learned that lesson with the first three VR games that we made. And the third one [The Unspoken] was the one where we really did answer the question, 'Why are we making this game for VR? What about it can you only do in the VR space?' My impression from looking at a lot of the games and talking to a lot of the developers is most people are now asking that question

and we don't know what the real answer is until we get feedback from players. Do you want to go all in on a 30-hour game without knowing the answer to that question? Many people have taken the approach that we're going to try a bunch of things that are outlandish, that are out there and see what the response is. And then as we learn, we're going to start building more scope into the games."

Now that the platforms are more established, many expect the bigger publishers to more seriously engage with the technology. "I'm convinced in the not-so-long run all players will be in VR," Rubin says.

The more development talent gravitates toward virtual reality, the better the chance someone hits on a technology-defining experience. While many intriguing titles like Superhot VR,

Robo Recall, and Job Simulator have come out, most agree that virtual reality still lacks a singular experience that cannot be replicated in any other medium, clearly communicates how amazing this technology can be, and ultimately drives consumer adoption.

"Do we have a killer app? Probably not yet," Layden says. "We're still trying to discover what are the things that are most attractive in a VR space. We're learning that together with developers, taking feedback from our fans. The fact that we don't have one yet makes it more exciting in the chase."

BUILDING TOWARD THE FUTURE

While we wait to see which studio cracks the code of that killer app, expect to see a rapid and exponential increase in the number of virtual-reality games, many of which offer long-form experiences more in line with traditional console games. Layden says more than 250 games are currently in development for PSVR, and he expects VR to play a big role at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo. Oculus plans to ship at least one major exclusive game a month for the Rift, and the Vive's library should continue to grow in diversity with more and more developers pledging to develop on the platform.

The other key to driving adoption is cost. Major price cuts like the Oculus reduction can only help, and with each passing day it gets cheaper for PC players to buy new VR-ready desktops and laptops.

"So long as we stick with continuing to push on price and pushing on content, the more consumers come, we will get there," Rubin says.

HTC has two new devices coming to Vive this year. The \$99 Tracker (left) can be attached to items like boxing gloves, baseball bats, and gun peripherals to track the objects in real-time for use in games. The \$99 Deluxe Audio Strap (right) has built in earphones for convenience



The Virtual Horizon

We break down the most promising games coming to VR platforms soon

The first year of any new console usually suffers from a lack of compelling content, and virtual-reality platforms were no different. Though a few standout games like Chronos, Superhot VR, and Robo Recall gave early adopters glimpses of the technology's potential, the vast majority of options were nothing more than glorified tech demos. Looking to 2017, we see a more promising stable of standard-length gaming experiences headed to PSVR, Rift, and Vive. These 12 titles currently show the most promise.



1 Arktika.1

Platform: Rift
Developer: 4A Games
Release: Fall

The minds behind the spectacular Metro series are jumping into VR with another apocalyptic shooter. Arktika.1 trades the nuclear fallout for a silent apocalypse brought on by an ice age. A part of the security force for one of the last enclaves of humanity, players defend the perimeter from whatever lurks outside. Graphically, Arktika.1 ranks right up there with Robo Recall as the best-looking VR games we've seen to date. Developer 4A Games has always delivered highly atmospheric experiences, and Arktika.1 is no exception. The game uses teleportation for navigating environments, and cover appears to be a key component to surviving firefights. Though we only got a small glimpse of the game, it has an interesting narrative underpinning, an intriguing setting begging to be explored, and promising combat with a wealth of weapon upgrades.



2 Fallout 4

Platform: Vive
Developer: Bethesda Game Studios
Release: 2017

Bethesda still plans to bring the entire Fallout 4 experience to VR later this year, and that depth of content is just what these content-starved platforms need. We haven't seen the game in VR since E3 last year, but we recently spoke to Bethesda Studios head Todd Howard and asked how the project is coming along. "I'm a little biased, but it's an incredible experience," he says. "It's one of the best video gaming experiences I've had. There are still issues because the game is so open, how you traverse that world and different movement schemes. We hope to support many. I think that is a potential issue, but if you think about VR and the promise of, 'I'm in this virtual world and I can do what I want,' Fallout in VR is that."

3 Farpoint

Platform: PSVR
Developer: Impulse Gear
Release: May 16

Sony has high hopes for this VR shooter, so much that it's bundling the game with its new PSVR Aim peripheral, an SMG-shaped device that gives VR experiences more realistic gunplay. Set on an unwelcoming planet, Farpoint casts players as an adventurer trying to find his colleagues while facing off with a hostile alien threat. The first-person game uses thumbstick locomotion for movement instead of the teleportation many shooters have adopted in the early years of VR. In addition to a six-to-eight hour campaign, Farpoint also features a cooperative mode that throws you into the fray with another friend.

5



4 From Other Suns

Platform: Rift

Developer: Gunfire Games

Release: Fall

Part FTL, part Borderlands, this three-player cooperative shooter gives players control of their own spaceship and tasks them with gathering resources for a fight against an intergalactic threat trying to eradicate humanity. Players choose which star system to jump to next, and will have to man the various ship stations to power up the shields, fire cannons on hostile ships, and repair damage done during the combat. Once the coast is clear, the trio can teleport to the nearby planet or space station to gather valuable resources and loot weaponry from the enemies. You only have as many lives as the number of crew members on board your ship, so to avoid a game over screen you need to proceed cautiously. Gunfire Games says each level of these away missions are procedurally generated, and it should take 15-20 hours to get through one playthrough.

6



5 Lone Echo

Platform: Rift

Developer: Ready at Dawn

Release: 2017

The studio behind games like The Order: 1886 and the excellent God of War PSP games is venturing into the virtual space with an interesting space drama featuring a novel movement mechanic. In the year 2126, humans have ventured further into the solar system, mining the rings of Saturn for valuable resources. Androids do most of the heavy lifting, keeping the spaceship operational while captain Olivia Rhodes oversees the mission. When an energy anomaly causes a catastrophic wreckage, a player-controlled android must work to save her. Players navigate the zero gravity by grabbing onto objects with the Touch controllers and flinging themselves in the direction they want to go. These mechanics also extend into a standalone *Ender's Game*-style multiplayer mode where you try to fling a Tron-like disc into a goal to win.

6 Mage's Tale

Platform: Rift

Developer: InXile Entertainment

Release: Summer

This Oculus Touch-powered first-person dungeon crawler from the RPG experts at inXile puts you in the robes of a budding sorcerer. Taking place in the Bard's Tale universe, you must delve deeper into the catacombs to save your master from the evil wizard Gaufoi. A variety of goblins, ghosts, and major bosses roam these halls, and each combat scenario creates a puzzle for you to solve. As you explore the nooks and crannies of these ruins, you come across valuable resources you can send back to your cauldron to craft more powerful spells. An RPG leveling system offers you a choice of two upgrades each time you raise a rank, giving you more health or mana, or perhaps the ability to make a large shield to deflect powerful spells. Mage's Tale has 11 dungeons to explore, so it won't be a bite-sized experience like the early wizard games on VR platforms.



7



8



9



10

7 Paranormal Activity: The Lost Soul

Platform: PSVR, Rift, Vive

Developer: VRWerx

Release: 2017

Horror games have proven to be one of the most popular styles of games for early adopters. This first-person exploration/puzzle game based in the universe of the popular film franchise offers another chance to scare the bejesus out of you. Armed with nothing but a flashlight, you must come face to face with the apparition haunting your domestic domain. Over the course of the five-to-ten hour experience, expect to encounter many of the scenarios that made the hair stand up on the back of your neck while you watched the movies. The Lost Soul is currently available in Steam Early Access for \$39.99. The full version launches later this year on all three platforms with more randomized encounters and a general coat of polish.

8 The Persistence

Platform: PSVR

Developer: Firesprite

Release: May

The next big survival-horror game coming to PSVR, The Persistence throws players onboard the eponymous research vessel in deep space. As you awake from cryosleep, you realize the ship is in rough condition. Moving through the darkened corridors, you must restore engine power and track down your fellow passengers while evading and killing the mutated threats around every corner. The entire ship is procedurally generated, and each time you die you awake as a new passenger. Not all is lost after every death, as all the stem cells you harvested during your last attempt can be used to enhance your new character.

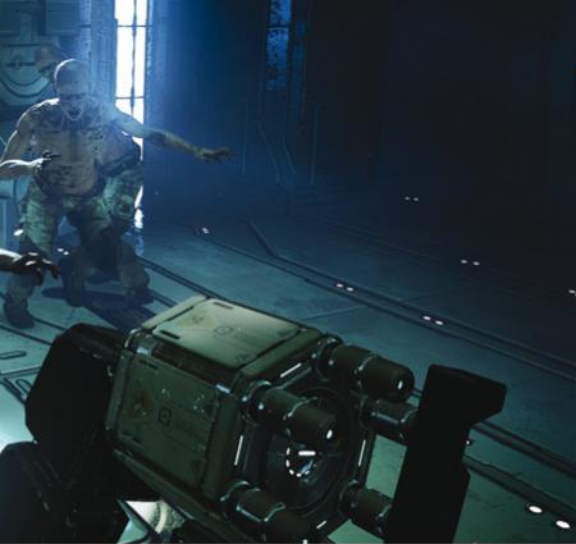
9 Project Cars 2

Platform: Rift, Vive

Developer: Slightly Mad Studios

Release: Late 2017

Slightly Mad Studios isn't taking its foot off the gas for the second entry in its Project Cars series. The studio plans to launch the speedy sequel with support for both Rift and Vive out of the gate. The simulation racer includes a wide variety of ways to compete, including Rallycross, IndyCar, and your classic collection of sportscar-oriented challenges. The team plans to ship with more than 170 licensed cars from your favorite manufacturers, as well as "the largest track roster of any console racing game." Slightly Mad Studios also has a PSVR version in development, but hasn't confirmed the title is definitely coming to that platform just yet.



10 Sparc

Platform: PSVR, Rift, Vive
Developer: CCP Games
Release: 2017

CCP typically focuses its development efforts on its Eve universe, but it's stepping out of its comfort zone with Sparc. This one-on-one sports game gives each player a ball in a tight corridor space and challenges them to hit the other player to rack up points. Defenders can dodge, use a shield to block, or punch back the oncoming attack, and attackers can apply English to the ball or use the walls to come at the defender from different angles. You can score against your opponent either by hitting them with either ball. With simple motion controls, Sparc is easy to pick up and difficult to master. We could see this virtual sport becoming destination for VR players, and the cross platform support between Vive and Rift should help foster a competitive community.



11 Star Trek: Bridge Crew

Platform: PSVR, Rift, Vive
Developer: Red Storm Entertainment
Release: May 30

Ubisoft has invested more into VR than most triple-A publishers at this juncture, with Eagle Eye and Werewolves Within both launching last year. Bridge Crew is the company's most ambitious VR title to date, putting players in control of a Federation starship *U.S.S. Aegis*. As your team explores an uncharted region of space known as The Trench searching for a new homeworld for the Vulcans, the Klingons throw a wrench in your plans. The four players take various roles on the bridge, and must communicate between the captain, tactical officer, engineer, and helm officer to survive hostile encounters. Think Space Team, but with the Star Trek license and a VR setting that throws you right into the action. Once you finish the story mode, you can continue to play in randomly generated missions.

12 Wilson's Heart

Platform: Rift
Developer: Twisted Pixel
Release: April 25

Best known for its irreverent sense of humor showcased in games like Splosion Man and LocoCycle, for its first VR effort Twisted Pixel trades jocularity for tension. Set in the 1940s, Wilson's Heart centers on an older man (voiced by Peter Weller) who awakens in a hospital with no recollection of how he got there or why his heart has been replaced with a mysterious device. Venturing through the hospital's various wards, players interact with other patients and do some serious problem solving to figure out what the hell is going on. Built more like a traditional game, Twisted Pixel wants to continually throw new circumstances and puzzles players' way over the course of the eight-hour experience. ♦

WORST GAME SUBTITLES

by Kyle Hilliard



Ogre Battle 64: Person Of Lordly Caliber

A game is never made or broken by its subtitle. It's the little bit of extra title we all choose to ignore because it is usually bad or confusing. For example, Ogre Battle takes place in a medieval era, but we doubt a knight ever said the words "lordly caliber" without snickering.



Twin Eagle: Revenge Joe's Brother

Twin Eagle is an old-school helicopter-shooter arcade game with a subtitle that raises far more questions than it answers. Is Revenge Joe a character? Are we trying to take revenge on behalf of Joe's brother? Is it a task to be completed? Are they twins? It's very confusing.



Dragon Quest Heroes: The World Tree's Woe And The Blight Below

The World Tree is an important part of Dragon Quest lore, and its inclusion in this subtitle is welcome. But the rhyming scheme feels forced, and the fact that the secondary title is twice as long as the main title makes it all the more troubling.



Yu-Gi-Oh! Power Of Chaos: Joey The Passion

Fans of Yu-Gi-Oh! often root for Joey Wheeler. He's a friend to Yugi and a talented card player. When he finally got the chance to be the focal point of a game, however, Konami burdened him with the worst Metal Gear Solid 3-style nickname ever.



Frogger: Helmet Chaos

Frogger is a classic arcade game that became a forgettable 3D platformer in 2001. Our confusion here contains multitudes: What do helmets have to do with Frogger? What is Helmet Chaos? And if it is what we think it is, how could that possibly be interesting or fun?



Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together

The Ogre series earns the distinction of being featured on this list twice. If we knew nothing about the series, the subtitle would make us think we're signing up for some kind of horror-romance experience involving ogres. Also, tactics are involved?



Under Night In-Birth Exe:Late

The main title for this game is not doing it any favors, but the subtitle really puts it over the edge of absurdity. The full subtitle is Exe:Late, without spaces, so it's a bit of programming language, followed by the thing you don't want to be to work.



Armored Core: For Answer

We can't even begin to figure out what For Answer could possibly mean in relation to bidepal robots. To be fair though, this game comes from the same studio that thought the name Demon's Souls was a pleasant phrase to say, so we shouldn't be surprised.



Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game Of The Movie

We all forgot being gripped by Kong fever in 2005. This Xbox 360 launch title and its subtitle made damn sure you knew there was a new movie. We're surprised they didn't sneak "from the director of Lord of the Rings" somewhere in there.



Mathemagics: An Interactive Learning Cube

Making a game that teaches while being fun to play is hard, but naming it isn't. It's just the carrot to get you in the door and trick you into learning. We don't know what a learning cube is, but we don't think it's something we want our children taking lessons from. ♦

WHO WOULDN'T BUY A BAG FEATURING
THIS HANDSOME GUY'S FACE?



You're right. I should be getting
commission for this.





SUBMISSIONS AND SUBSCRIBERS

photo: John Locher

by Brian Shea

As UFC flyweight champion Demetrious Johnson gears up for his record-tying tenth consecutive title defense, the pound-for-pound best fighter in the world eyes another full-time career: streaming video games.

When the UFC expanded to include a men's flyweight division in 2012, Demetrious Johnson emerged as its first champion. Fast forward five years and "Mighty Mouse" still dons the championship belt. He has not only consistently been the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world, but Johnson has been so dominant that the UFC's reality show, *The Ultimate Fighter*, dedicated one of its 2016 seasons to finding someone to beat him – a fight that Johnson also won. Despite having his eye on the record for most title defenses in UFC history – an honor currently held by the legendary Anderson Silva – Johnson has dedicated himself to growing his audience streaming video games on Twitch.

Johnson is a lifelong gamer, which explains why an elite athlete in one of the world's biggest sports organizations is passionate about streaming video games. The 30-year-old fondly recalls his first game of *Super Contra* on NES, which he played with his mom.

Much more recently, Johnson entered the

world of Twitch, which he first became aware of in 2014. "I was rocking my first-born son to sleep and watching a streamer play *Mega Man X*," he says. "My wife kind of opened the door to my streaming, as she told me to look at it as a way to interact with my fans on a different platform."

Johnson began streaming under the name *Mightymouseufc125*. The fighter plays high-profile games, showing off everything from *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* and *H1Z1* to *Resident Evil 7* and *Street Fighter V*. However, he intentionally avoids streaming UFC games. "When I started streaming [my audience] demanded it," he says. "I tell them that I do that every day for a living, so I don't need to simulate it on a console."

In addition to his favorite streaming games, Johnson has a lot of love for the *Dark Souls* series, calling the third entry his favorite game of 2016. He's also anticipating fighting games such as *Tekken 7* and *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite*.

Johnson is a high-energy presence in the Octagon, but he takes a different approach to streaming. While many streamers play up their personalities on camera, Johnson refuses. "I try to be as natural as possible because I'm in it for the long haul, not for a quick buck," he says. "I love playing video games and interacting with my fans in the platform more than fighting, actually."

It might sound strange to hear a professional athlete at the pinnacle of his career casually say he likes his hobby more than his sport, but Johnson sees streaming as more than just a hobby. According to him, his priorities are his family, then training, then streaming. "There will come a point and time in my life when streaming will be my full-time job, if I can make it to that level financially," he says. "Right now, fighting pays the bills."

Johnson has grown his audience rapidly, producing over 300 videos on the service and amassing nearly 90,000 followers to show for it. While Johnson says he's always looking for new ways to evolve as a streamer, even going as far as building a dedicated streaming room in his new house, he's appreciative of how being known as a UFC champion has helped grow his audience. "My mixed martial arts fame has helped me get a decent start building an audience, but it's still a grind and I want more emotes slots [laughs]," he says.

Though he's focused on his next title defense against Wilson Reis on April 15, Johnson says he thinks a particular video game character would give him a huge challenge in the ring even if he didn't have his powers or a significant weight advantage: *Street Fighter's* Akuma. "He is consumed by rage so it would be hard to take him down," he says.

"Mighty Mouse" shows no signs of slowing down in either the Octagon or on Twitch. If his ascension into streaming and Twitch partnership is any indication, Johnson could very well reach his goal streaming full-time. 💎

Championing Other Streamers

Despite his success on Twitch, Demetrious Johnson still enjoys watching others stream via the service. The champion says his favorite streamers are Dr. DisRespect, known for his rage-filled *H1Z1* streams, and GoldGlove, another *H1Z1* player who has also recently streamed games like *Mass Effect Andromeda* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*.



SATISFACTION IN SECONDS™

HEAT IT UP. EAT IT UP.



Down But Not Out

How a fighting-game documentary survived 9/11 and became a cult favorite

by Suriel Vazquez

On the day Peter Kang's years-long passion project went up in flames, it wasn't his biggest concern. Two commercial airliners had just collided with the World Trade Center in New York, and while the morning news was inundated with coverage of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Kang didn't need to watch. "I looked out the window, and of course the north tower's on fire from the first crash," Kang says. As he was escorted out of Battery Park to safety by the NYPD, the Street Fighter documentary he'd been editing was the last thing on his mind.

But since then, Kang's been thinking about it a lot. After turning what little footage he had left into the award-winning film *Bang the Machine*, he's been on a 15-year, on-and-off journey to have it see the light of day. The road has been rough and Kang still hasn't defeated the film's toughest opponent, but as in the scene he documented at the turn of the millennium, victory is always within reach.

From Designer To Filmmaker

Bang the Machine, a documentary series chronicling the emerging arcade and online culture of Street Fighter competitions, was the brainchild of Kang and Gene Na. The two were partners at Kioken, a cutting-edge web design agency with high-profile clients such as Diddy and Jennifer Lopez. A few years in, they decided to sell the company in order to pursue a life-long passion. "I was a big Street Fighter fan, I used to play on all the arcades," Kang says. In fact, the two had met playing Street Fighter II in arcades, so naturally, they wanted to honor the community they'd been a part of for years.

Around that time, Kang was in San Francisco for a client meeting and decided to visit Southern Hills Golfland, a popular destination for the West Coast's best Street Fighter players. There he met players like John Choi, Joey "Mr. Wizard" Cuellar, and Alex Valle – people he'd heard about in magazines and online IRC channels, but never met in person. They became fast

friends, and after returning to New York, Kang and Na got to work. "We decided that since we had access to these people, if we could find a director we could start a film-production company with the hopes of licensing this [project]," Kang says.

That director was Tamara Lowe, a film student at the Rhode Island School of Design. Lowe was introduced to the pair through her roommate, a senior designer at Kioken. Lowe had been interested in making a documentary for a while, but wasn't aware of the scene. "It was a steep learning curve for me, because I wasn't a gamer," Lowe says.

To orient Lowe in arcade culture, Kang took her to Chinatown Fair, a New York City arcade. There Lowe spent hours talking to players, learning their stories and nitty gritty details, such as how the survival-of-the-fittest and region-oriented culture of arcades sparked competition, and how players dreamed of playing video games for a living someday.

Select Your Character

Next, the film's crew needed players to follow. Among the most popular games at the time was Street Fighter Alpha 3, and Alex Valle was its American champion. Valle wasn't on board with the documentary at first, but changed his mind after speaking with Tom and Tony Cannon, twin brothers who ran the tournament the film would center around, B4 (Battle By The Bay, which would later become The Evolution Championship Series, best known as Evo).

The film highlighted several players, including Valle, over the course of a year as they compete throughout Northern and Southern California in the lead up to B4. The stakes for B4 were higher than most other tournaments, since victory came with the chance to travel to Japan to compete in a fighting-game exhibition pitting the United States against Japan in a number of fighting games. "Back then traveling internationally was unheard of, because it was so expensive" says Cuellar, who helped run B4. "People almost never traveled for video games back then."

Bang the Machine captures much of the raw passion that permeated the Street Fighter scene at the time. Though playing for your local region is still a big part of competitive gaming, rivalries were both more local and more heated in the late '90s and early 2000s. "There was no just being friendly and kind to everyone, it was super fierce," Cuellar says. "If one of your rivals beat one of your team members, it was pretty personal."

An Upset Victory

After filming for the better part of a year, the team got to work putting the series together (see sidebar). Unfortunately, the team's office was located directly south of the south tower of The World Trade Center, and on Sept. 11, 2001, most of the digital footage, some film footage, and much of the audio for the film was destroyed. "It was terrible," Lowe says. "People lost their lives. And in comparison to that kind of loss, a documentary about gaming didn't seem like something that I could get that upset about. But I was pretty devastated."

Not all of the footage was lost (some of the film negatives at a processing lab survived), but the team had to severely reduce the scope of the project. Scenes were cut and characters were removed. Most of the audio came from VHS tapes Kang and Lowe had been bringing home from the editing studio. "What survived, that kind of dictated what kind of story we were going to tell," Kang says.

Lowe, Kang, and the crew put together an early cut that made it into the 2002 SXSW film festival, where it screened for hundreds of people who knew nothing about the fighting-game

The day after the attacks, a police officer escorted the crew back into their office building to sift through the wreckage





community. Viewers flocked to the film. “We had a certain number of screenings, and we had to schedule more because it was such a big turnout,” Lowe says. *Bang The Machine* ended up winning an audience award at SXSW, and anticipation for a full release was high.

A Daunting Challenge

Unfortunately, that didn’t happen. Despite the reception, no distributor picked the film up for a full release. The documentary also used a number of licensed songs from prominent artists, which made it expensive to release. And because much of the footage used in the film came from screener tapes that had already been finished, the audio and video were already meshed together. “We had like a Beatles track or a Chemical Brothers track mixed in to Valle speaking, and we couldn’t separate the two,” Lowe says. Because the company couldn’t pay the fees to license these songs, *Bang the Machine* couldn’t officially release.

Despite the setback, the film slowly developed a cult status within the fighting game community. In 2004, Cuellar reached out to Kang about getting a copy of the film (of which there are only a handful) for a small screening at that year’s Evo tournament, after which Kang overnighted a DVD of the film. Since then, Cuellar has occasionally shown the film to small crowds at Evo tournaments. Beyond that,

however, few outside of the crew’s friends and families have ever seen it.

Fight For The Future

Though the crew behind *Bang the Machine* has moved on, Kang still keeps up with Lowe, as well as players like Valle, Cuellar, and John Choi. “We’re all still super-tight. Everyone still talks to each other every day,” he says.

Kang hasn’t given up on the film, either. “The plan has always been, and we haven’t changed our minds, but we will get this thing released at some point, come hell or high water,” he says. The biggest issue is still the music licensing rights, which Kang hopes overcome by running a fundraising campaign to pay the fees, which Kang estimates would total around \$300,000. The core team also has plans for a sequel of

sorts, catching up with many of the players featured in the original film.

If the film does receive a full release someday, it’ll be in a context far removed from the one that birthed it. Originally conceived as a way to show a larger audience the future of competitive gaming, *Bang the Machine* now acts as a time machine to its nascent past. But for all that has changed in the years since the film’s release, Kang still sees it as the distillation of the fighting game community’s inclusive spirit. “It didn’t matter who you were,” Kang says. “Everyone’s just kind of blind to the normal tags people have on themselves, how the world usually segments us and kind of divides people.” Considering the circumstances which nearly destroyed the film, it’s a powerful message. 💎

What Could Have Been

Originally, *Bang the Machine* was going to be more than a film. “The plan was to shoot for television,” Kang says. “It was going to be seasonal. [Like] the Netflix model, where you have maybe eight to 10 episodes for a season.” The project would also have been part of a much larger look at gaming communities around the world, such as those for StarCraft on PC gaming cafes in Korea. “There’s a million things we could have done,” Kang says.

COMPETING IN THE UNDERGROUND

From a Shrek fighter to a deceptively simple capture-the-flag game, we look at the communities of a few unconventional games thriving right under your nose

Games breed competition, even in the most unlikely places. Beneath the lavish surface of eSports' stage-lit broadcasts and six-figure prize pools, players around the world create more obscure competitive communities to dedicate

themselves to. Some games are built for a small, but dedicated crowd. Others have cultivated a scene almost despite themselves. Here, we look at a number of scenes outside the competitive mainstream, as well as one looking to revitalize old classics.

by Suriel Vazquez

Shrek SuperSlam

When Shrek SuperSlam released in 2005 among a slew of hackneyed licensed games, few could have guessed it would go on to have a burgeoning competitive scene. It played like Power Stone and aimed to cash in on the Super Smash Bros. craze of the time, but was received poorly by critics and players alike. Over the years, however, it's become the centerpiece of a small but dedicated community.

The game had its first big breakthrough in September of last year, when online media and YouTube channels realized people were playing the game competitively. The idea of people building a community around an obscure 3D fighting game based on the *Shrek* films seemed like a strange, albeit intriguing, joke. As a result, people took notice.

However, behind the farcical premise lies a game with more to it than meets the eye. "The physics are really exploitable in a way most other fighters' aren't," says Jeremy "m0th64"

Collins, a competitive SuperSlam player. The game's freeform physics allow for a high degree of malleability, giving every match a sense of variety. SuperSlam's technical engine also allows players to cancel almost any move into another, leading players to frequently discover new combos and strategies.

The scene continued to grow after September, as players released videos demonstrating new techniques, talking tactics, and hosting tournaments. Though the most prominent tournaments happen online using a PC emulator that allows for online play, several people, including Collins, have started hosting tournaments in their local areas. Tournaments are currently slated for the U.S., U.K., and Sweden.

The scene's most popular in summer, which means it should pick up later this year. While it may not be a competitive household name now, Collins doesn't think the Shrek SuperSlam scene is going to die off anytime soon. "It's too big to go away," he says.

TagPro

TagPro looks and at first plays like a simple game. Tiny spheres slide around the screen, bumping into each other and moving flags back and forth across a set of identical silver tiles. Occasionally, the spheres burst, or pick up power-ups laid around the map. The art looks straight out of Microsoft Paint. And yet, in 2017, it's one of the most popular multiplayer games you probably don't know about, all while maintaining a pure competitive spirit.

TagPro first took off via a post on Reddit's "r/webgames" subforum. "It started growing because any time there'd be a thread on Reddit asking, 'What's a fun game to play right now?'" TagPro was invariably the top answer," says Matt "PrivateMajor" Hedges, who has been heavily involved with the TagPro community for years and in the past has run its North American league.

Part of what has made the game so popular is its simplicity allows players to slowly unfurl new strategies that are more about careful thinking than quick execution, while its analog



maneuverability makes it difficult to master. “You can’t stop immediately. You have to plan your movements and you can’t play it perfectly,” Hedges says.

In just a few short years, TagPro has grown large enough to house North American, European, and Oceanic leagues, and the level of competition is fierce. In order to keep the game fun, the community has decided to keep money out of it. Even Nick Riggs, the game’s developer, doesn’t make much money from the game, preferring to support himself through his day job. “It’s a hobby for him, but he’s very involved in the game,” Hedges says.

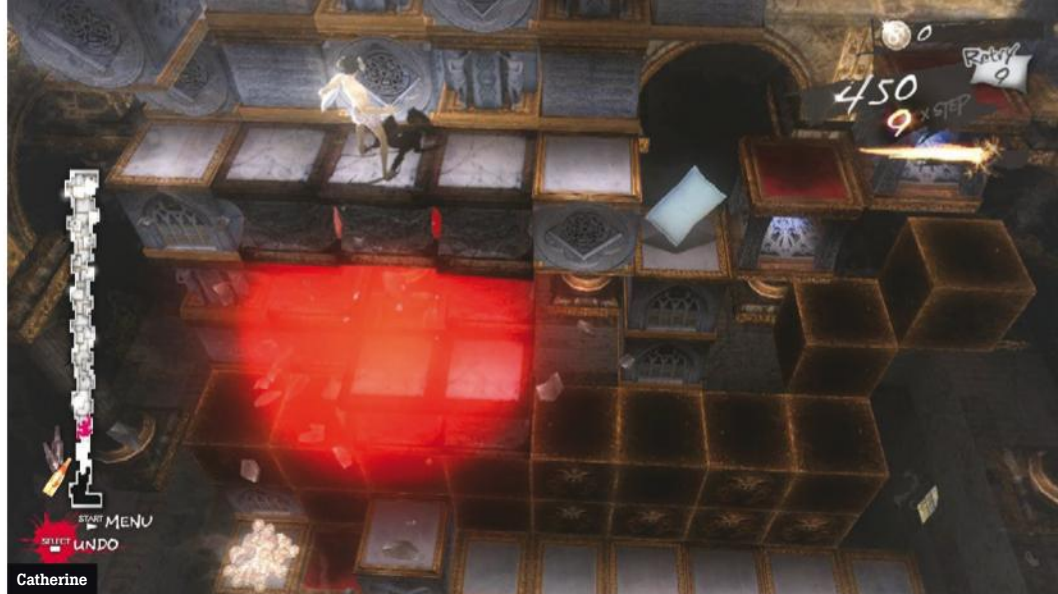
For anyone who even has an inkling of interest, Hedges encourages them to give it a try. After all, there’s nothing to lose. “Play one game for 10 minutes and you’ll either love it or won’t,” he says. “Most people love it.”

Catherine

At California’s 2011 Norcal Install fighting game tournament, Catherine was supposed to be a joke. The block-climbing puzzle game is primarily a single-player experience, remembered more for its portrayal of modern relationships than its gameplay. But David “Dacidbro” Broweleit and his friend Sean “Coopa” Hoang saw Catherine’s competitive potential. “We discovered a wealth of fundamental fighting-game play in the game and taught everyone the rough basics on the day of the tournament,” Broweleit says. Catherine ended up a surprise hit, going viral on Twitch.

Since then, the Catherine competitive scene has only grown. “Just a year ago I could count on one or two hands how many meaningful players there were,” Broweleit says. “Now we’re nearing 50-100.” Players have begun hosting tournaments in California, Florida, New York, and more, and the viewership seems to be there, as well; thousands are tuning in to see high-level Catherine play.

And as the number grows, the competition gets stiffer. One of the



game’s biggest evangelists, Broweleit was also its uncontested champion in the game’s early years. Recently, he’s had to work much harder to keep his throne. “[At tournaments] it used to be a fairly obvious top three [players], and now even in the top sixteen we see a lot of upsets.” Catherine is still young as a competitive game, which leaves plenty of room for new players to come in and pull the rug out from veteran players. “We only gained full control over the structure of the stages in the last year, which has lead to dramatic changes in openings and a much more interesting ability to improvise and add nuance,” Broweleit says.

The game has recently received more support from major fighting game tournaments, and Broweleit has even launched his own dedicated event, King of Catherine. Atlus, the game’s publisher, has also lent a hand, offering its official Twitch page for some events.

FightCade

Though Street Fighter II is one of the most well-known competitive games in the world, when Pau “pof” Olivia Fora wanted to play it online in 2013, he found his options lacking. Most of the grassroots online infrastructures

for playing older fighting games online (such as GGPO and SuperCade) offered viable ways to play but were only available on PC, leaving Fora, a Linux user, out of luck. Not one to give up easily, Fora managed to reverse-engineer GGPO’s netcode for the operating system. Eventually, Fora decided to create his own server and invite a group of Street Fighter II diehards to play. Word quickly got out about a new way to play Street Fighter II online, and players flocked to the new server. Thus, the FightCade community was formed.

Today, the service boasts 300,000 registered users and 30,000 active monthly players, many of them hailing from Brazil, The United States, and France. Although FightCade began with Super Turbo, the community has grown to accommodate all kinds of retro fighting games: as of this writing, Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike, The King of Fighters ’98: Dream Match Never Ends, and The King of Fighters 2002: Challenge to Ultimate Battle’s playerbases outpace Super Turbo’s.

Though there’s some crossover with offline competitive players, FightCade has cultivated a community of its own. Veterans log on and duke it out with each other for hours at a time, but there’s room for more lighthearted competition. “There are also people who just play casually or for fun, or people who rediscover the game and want to get good,” Fora says. “And the best way [to do that] if the game doesn’t have a local offline community is to face stronger players online.”

The FightCade community has grown large enough, ironically, to host its first in-person event, the FightCade Offline Festival, in Spain this year. Fitting with the community’s love of retro fighters, Fora plans to run the tournament on Japanese candy-style cabinets. If the event is popular enough, Fora hopes to make it a regular event for fans of the fighting games of yesteryear. 💎



Quotable

"I'd far rather people were pissed off I didn't release something than I release something I wasn't happy with and try to take money from them. That's the most important thing."



Dean Hall, DayZ creator speaking to *Eurogamer* on the cancellation of space-survival MMO *Ion*, which was announced at Microsoft's E3 2015 press conference.

The Good



NINTENDO is doubling production of its Switch console to meet demand, with aims of manufacturing 16 million or more by March 2018. So far the system is a big hit, breaking the company's two-day sales record previously posted by the Wii.

The Bad

Longtime video game industry veteran and Electronic Arts chief competition officer **PETER MOORE** is leaving games to become chief executive officer at Liverpool Football Club – the soccer team the Liverpudlian Moore has long supported. All the best to Moore at the club, and our hearty thanks for all he has done for video games, from the Dreamcast to Microsoft and EA.



The Ugly



JOHN CARMACK, legendary developer and Oculus VR chief technology officer, filed a lawsuit against Bethesda parent company ZeniMax for \$22.5 million. Carmack's lawsuit claims ZeniMax owes him money from the sale of Carmack's id Software to ZeniMax in 2009.

Interestingly, ZeniMax and Oculus are locked into a lawsuit over the technology behind the Oculus VR headset; in February a jury awarded ZeniMax \$500 million for Oculus' founder Palmer Luckey's breach of a non-disclosure agreement. 💎



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The 8-Bit Conqueror

Meet the man who beat all 714 NES games

After Piotr “TheMexicanRunner” Kusielczuk burned out on speed-running, he started looking for a new challenge to pursue. When a friend suggested he play every Nintendo Entertainment System game for five minutes, Kusielczuk came up with a better goal: Beat every game officially released for the system. Beginning in May 2014, after several marathon sessions, a few bumps, and learning some basic piano skills, on February 26 he finally succeeded, becoming the first person on record to do so.

Name:
Piotr Kusielczuk
Occupation:
Twitch Streamer
Twitter:
@TheMexicanRunner
Twitch:
Twitch.tv/
themexicanrunner
Location:
Gdansk, Poland

interview by Suriel Vazquez

How did you decide when games without proper endings were “beaten?”

At the beginning I was just “looping” [playing until no new enemies or challenges arose - Ed] them. If the game started looping, I considered the game beaten. But later on there were a few games I had considered beaten and people told me, “You didn’t beat the game because it has 20 stages.” I had thought it looped at stage 13 or 14, so I had to redo those games. [In] games like Pac-Man, I was going for the last cutscene you get, and in Galaga I went for the last challenge stage, in level 31. I was trying to get something demanding.

Did you find any strategies that worked across several games?

Every game is different, but for example in shooter games, where you have enemies [coming] from behind and forward, one of the strategies I used was being in the middle. Because on the NES you only have a certain of bullets you can shoot [at a time], being in the middle, the bullets disappear off the screen faster, so you are able to shoot more often.

After having beaten every game for it, what’s your favorite NES game?

Battletoads is my favorite game. Every single level design is amazing. One level everything gets warped, one level you have a surfboard. One of the last levels you have a 3D effect. I think they pushed the system to the maximum and showed everything it can do. I think it was too hard for a lot of people, but it’s my favorite game.

What’s your least favorite?

I didn’t like Paperboy too much. It just felt really bad. There was a soccer game, Kick Off, that was also a bad game.

What’s the hardest game you played?

Championship Pool was a very tough game. The problem with that game is that it’s random. I mean there were strategies, but [lining up shots] the way you wanted, that randomness factor, it was very unforgiving.

The game that took you the longest to finish was Miracle Piano Teaching System, which

took 91 hours. Do you feel like you’ve learned piano after beating it?

That’s what people normally think, but if you go to piano lessons or dance lessons for two hours for a year, that doesn’t make you a dancer. I learned a few songs, but I can’t play stuff people might want me to play. I guess I can consider myself a very bad piano player.

Did you find a new appreciation for any game you played?

The Adventures of Lolo games, Palamedes. The puzzle games, because they force your brain to think. Those games were really good, and that was a category I never played when I was a kid.

Would you ever consider doing this for another console?

A lot of people really want me to do that, because that’s the logic, right? Move on to the SNES, for example. Personally, I don’t know. I would be happy to do it, but the fact that there’s a lot of work behind the scenes to be done, it doesn’t leave a lot of time to live my life. 💎



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The Indie Games of GDC 2017

by Game Informer Staff

Each year, the best and brightest designers in the world gather in San Francisco to examine the state of the industry, learn from each other, and discuss the world of interactive entertainment at the Game Developers Conference. In recent years, it's also become a place where indie-game makers showcase their latest work. We saw some amazing games on display during the event. Here are some of our favorites.

Dandara

Platform: Switch • PC • iOS • Android

Release: Summer

From Brazilian studio Long Hat House, *Dandara* is a Metroid-inspired game where you must restore a directionless world. You explore this gravity-bending world by launching your character onto safe platforms, avoiding obstacles, and mowing down baddies with your gun. There's something satisfying about gliding your character across platforms and obstacles with ease. You can either use a touchscreen and swipe your character, or use the directional pad to aim her toward her next destination. A lot of *Dandara* is about learning the landscape, and dying often imparts wisdom. We progressed faster and more confidently as we learned the landscape. Just like any Metroid game, certain areas are blocked off until you obtain the right skill to unlock them. The area we saw was centered on artists, so we saw themed NPCs like a musician and painter. Expect crazy boss fights, from vicious trucks to floating heads, as you prove you can think fast and persevere through the most chaotic situations.



Knights And Bikes

Platform: PS4 • PC

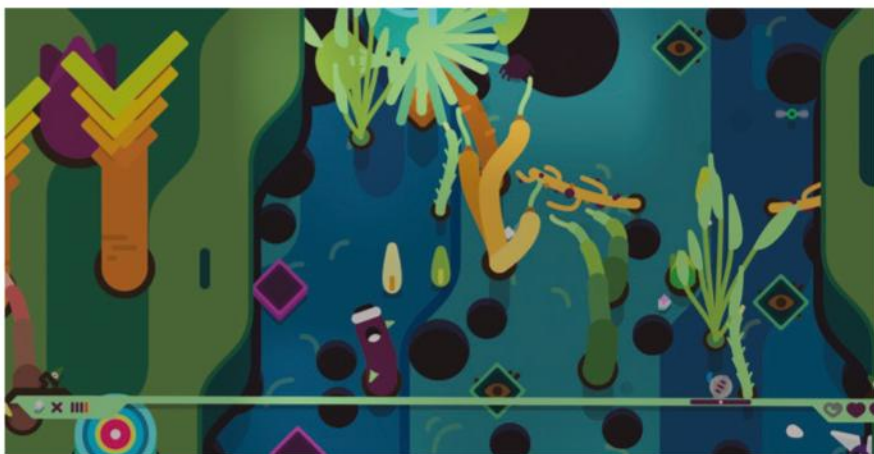
Release: TBA

This colorful and playful debut from Foam Sword, a new studio composed of former Media Molecule developers, hardly lacks charm. Calling to mind adolescent-focused films like *The Goonies*, *Knights and Bikes* transports players to a fictional island in '80s Britain. With their hometown facing financial ruin, two well-intentioned kids with vivid imaginations set out to save their city and slay its metaphorical demons. The cooperative adventure brims with nostalgia, from protagonists Ness and Demelza cruising the town on bikes to the duo facing off against each other in impromptu action-figure battles. The action/RPG gameplay encourages exploring the various locations in town to gather useful new items and helpful companions. Look for the game on PS4 and Steam sometime in the future.

Necrobarista

Platform: PC
Release: 2018

A visual novel that's been in development for more than three years by Route 55, a small indie team in Australia, Necrobarista is fascinating for many reasons. First, it's completely 3D, which is extremely rare for the genre. Second, the wacky, supernatural setting is intriguing, taking place in a café where both the living and the dead interact with one another. Necrobarista's amusing and wacky characters are reminiscent of games like Grim Fandango, all of them suffering together in a rather slapstick manner as they try to find the things that make them happy in life...er...death. Though the plot has not been revealed in full, Necrobarista's setting is rich with promise and its colorful aesthetic is gorgeous, suggesting the final game should be a unique experience.



TumbleSeed

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release: 2017

From the developers of mobile hits Threes and Ridiculous Fishing comes a new game called TumbleSeed. Described as a “rolly roguelike,” you play as a seed rolling up a colorful, procedurally generated mountain that must evade obstacles like large holes and dangerous creatures that attack without mercy. Should you die at the hands of an enemy or fall into a pit, you must start over. The concept is easy enough to grasp, but the difficulty ramps up quickly. You balance your seed on a horizontal vine and can roll left or right as it scrolls up the terrain. As you progress, you can play as several different kinds of seeds, including one with a propeller on its head that can fly short distances, and another that can create storms to fill up holes with water so you won't fall in as easily. Between levels, you talk to other seed beings in villages, and can visit shops to get more items or even sacrifice your current seeds at temples to be given others at random.



Ooblets

Platform: Xbox One • PC
Release: 2018

Glumberland's first game combines the farming of Harvest Moon with the monster-catching of Pokémon. In Ooblets, you come to a new town and must make a new life for yourself. What better way to do that than to farm and have battles with the creatures (ooblets) you collect? When villagers challenge you to Pokémon-style battles, you then select your party and engage in turn-based combat. The creatures are especially adorable. We

saw a mushroom wearing sunglasses and a top hat, who had attacks like “snot boop.” Once you defeat a creature you don't have, you receive a seed, which you can then plant and harvest for a new ooblet to join your party. During your trek, you also explore different regions and find better items to help you get by. Hopefully, Ooblets can capture the engaging loop of the games it apes, but it already looks super promising and cute.



Flipping Death

Platform: Switch
Release: 2017

During Nintendo's "Nindies" event at GDC, Zoink Games revealed Flipping Death, a quirky platformer that switches between modern day and the afterlife. Flipping Death, a spiritual successor to Stick it to the Man, is peculiar in an amusing way, where you play as a young woman named Penny who recently died. Upon reaching the afterlife, she is told that the grim reaper is taking a vacation, and that she needs to be his replacement. You make your way through this world by jumping and

using your scythe to grapple onto ledges and to teleport. Along the way, you also possess the living that appear as shadowy figures in the afterlife. Once possessed, the world flips to the real world, where you embody different characters that each have distinct, bizarre abilities. For example, a dentist can use his drill to help you solve a puzzle, and a man sucking a lollipop can use his tongue to lick things. Flipping Death debuts on the Switch and other unannounced platforms later this year.

Mr. Shifty

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release: 2017

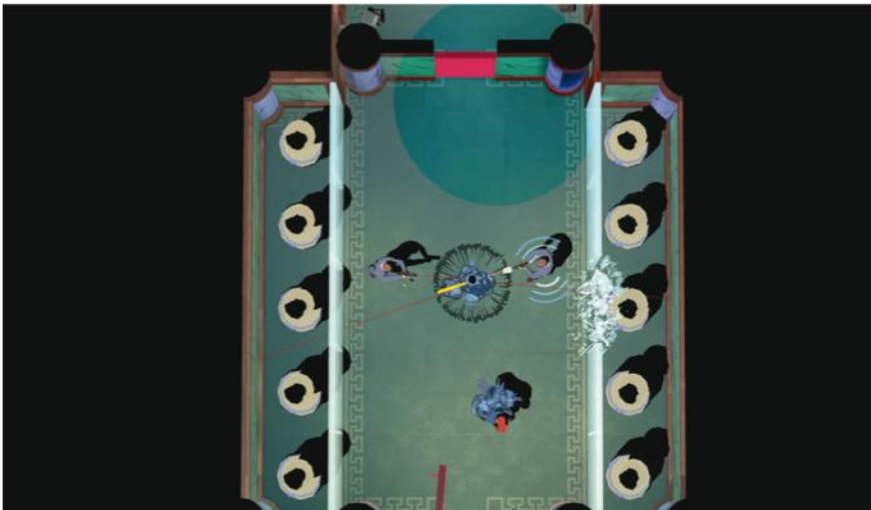
Mr. Shifty is a top-down brawler reminiscent of Hotline Miami with lightning-quick action and teleportation powers like X-Men's Nightcrawler. You infiltrate one of the world's most secure facilities to attempt a heist. You explore one level of the building to the next, and zoom in and out of different rooms with a speed similar to Overwatch's Tracer. The combat is fun and smooth, and although it's quick-paced, there are several ways to clear each stage. For example, you can catch enemies off-guard by stealthily taking them out, or you can battle them head on. Using the environment in creative ways is also amusing, such as knocking down doors so that they collapse on foes, or picking up a trident and hurling it to kill a row of enemies at once. Other objects, such as a broom or a pole, deal heavier damage when used to bash guards.



SteamWorld Dig 2

Platform: Switch
Release: Summer

Image and Form Games' sequel looks to improve on the already solid experience of its predecessor. In particular, this mining platformer features a longer campaign and ditches the procedurally generated levels of the original. Set to release on the Switch, SteamWorld Dig 2 reintroduces us to Dorothy, a merchant who we met in the first game. Gameplay-wise, this sequel is much more of the same: You wall-jump, dig to make your own paths, and take out bosses one by one to progress. The levels are each made with meticulous detail, with the warm glow of torches lighting the way and translucent pools to swim through. Although the entire game takes place underground, we were enamored by the atmosphere.



Sundered

Platform: PS4 • PC

Release: July

Sundered is a hand-drawn, macabre platformer from Thunder Lotus, the makers of Jotun. Playing as Eshe, you wander through a post-apocalyptic world filled with eldritch horrors. It features all the pillars of a classic Metroid game, such as wall-jumping, dodging, shooting, and attacking enemies. As you progress, you retrieve golden shards that are used to unlock new abilities. An interesting twist, however, is that the skill tree can only be accessed each time you die. Abilities we saw in the demo included dashing and using a grappling hook to grab onto enemies or objects. The game can be difficult at times, especially when hordes of enemies attack you at once. This challenge, along with its beautiful aesthetics, is what makes Sundered worth looking out for.



Mineko's Night Market

Platform: PC • Mac

Release: 2018

This adorable market-simulation game from Brent "Meowza" Kobayashi has you managing your own night market, dealing with eclectic customers who want to barter. You have dialogue options to win them over and try to get the best sale. By day, you create your own items and collect things out in the wild to sell. Sounds pretty straightforward, until you realize the town you explore has been overrun by cats, which just adds an extra layer of intrigue and cuteness. Expect silly minigames such as cat races, sumo suit wrestling, karaoke, and taiko drumming to keep you entertained. Seeing the game in action showcased its charm, as strange things kept happening in our demo that made us chuckle. For instance, you can farm and harvest...cats?! As goofy as it may be, the game celebrates Japanese culture and friendship, so there's something very endearing about it.

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine

Platform: PC

Release: TBA

Dim Bulbs' upcoming game Where The Water Tastes Like Wine is an intriguing title from Gone Home's programmer, Johnnemann Nordhagen. You play a traveler wandering through a psychedelic presentation of The Great Depression. Presented as a "bleak American folktale," the all-governing currency is stories that you collect during your travels and tell around the campfires. A fantastical undercurrent runs through the game, with anamorphic people and surreal encounters being a common occurrence. The map is a gorgeous overlay filled with trees, highways, and campfires that glow in the night. Though it isn't clear what the purpose of your character's journey is, the painterly art style and focus on wandering makes Where The Water Tastes Like Wine, due out either late this year or early next year, a game to keep an eye on.



Heaven's Vault

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • iOS

Release: 2018

From the creators of 80 Days, Heaven's Vault marks a departure from the steam-punk trappings of the developer's previous adventure game. In Heaven's Vault you play a wandering archeologist named Aliya, who explores nebulas with her pint-sized robot. During the course of the game, you explore planets and learn the languages of the alien civilizations who lived there in centuries past. We played through a small portion of the game that showcased its graphic novel-inspired visuals and the branching paths that open up based on your choices. Your time on each planet is limited due to Aliya's decreasing oxygen levels, so you only have time to explore a limited run of the planet and come to understand as much of the language there as possible. Aliya's understanding of the languages influences how the game plays out, but Inkle didn't specify how. 



FOR HONOR

For Honor's unique take on melee combat is a thrilling experience, letting players live out their fantasies of grabbing a sword and becoming the biggest threat on the battlefield. However, its launch has been fraught with a variety of technical issues, as well as skepticism about its microtransactions. We spoke with Damian Kieken, the online game director, to see how Ubisoft Montreal is addressing these concerns.

by Jeff Cork

What are the biggest priorities for you right now for multiplayer?

One of the biggest priorities right now is the connectivity issues that some players might encounter in our game. Not everybody is subject to it, but some people have connectivity issues, and some are having more severe connectivity issues than others. That's a very high priority for us, because we want everybody to be able to play the game because it's something different, something fresh, with a very cool core fighting mechanic.

We're also managing things like fighting against cheaters, fighting against people who don't play, for example. We also did a lot of improvements in the matchmaking this past month. Right now it's not as much of a priority for us because it's working well, but we have some quality of match [issues] that we want to improve. We've already done quite a few patches related to balancing. Not too often, because then you always change the game, which is not good. But you need enough time so that everybody can play with his or her character and be a threat to all the other players.

When the game launched, I'd frequently get booted from matches if players left. More recently, it seems to be more aggressive about replacing players who leave with A.I. bots instead of ending matches entirely. Is that how you've addressed some of those stability issues?

Our game is based on a simulation, so basically everybody runs a simulation and that simulation needs to be synced together. Everybody needs to be in sync with all players, and that's the tech we built to make it possible

to have a core fight that is as precise as a fighting game in a 4v4 game. That was our technical breakthrough, but it comes with the idea of having a simulation. When players leave, we have to pause the simulation for everybody to get back into sync to make sure the game can continue to run. That's something that's a bit new in games, and I don't know if any other game is using that, but as with all new tech we have some issues and that's what we're working on. For example, we've noticed that when you have a lot of players joining and leaving, it can disrupt the simulation. So we've reduced the time when people can join. We're working on a penalty for when people rage-quit the game, because having fewer people leave will make the simulation way more stable.

I'm sure you've seen the Reddit posts that have calculated the amount of time it would take to unlock everything in the game without spending money – somewhere between 1.5 and 2 years. Is the intent for players to be able to reasonably unlock everything, or is the goal for players to focus on one or two heroes?

It's an interesting post. It's true in our case that we never designed the game in the way that we wanted you to unlock everything – by playing or paying, whatever the means you unlock things. The philosophy of the game is that we don't want to give the objective of unlocking everything. For Honor, you can look at it like a fighting game with an RPG wrapper around it. You have to treat it more like an RPG. We want to have a lot of content on one hero, a lot of content that you can plan to unlock, and you

could play several months on one hero with always having a new objective. That's one of the intentions that we had. You never ask a player to unlock all of the content for all the heroes in an MMORPG, for example. It doesn't make any sense.

What do you say to people who see the microtransactions in the game as being pay-to-win?

That's an interesting subject. First, one of the things we noticed post-launch is that the UI that shows you the stats is not really showing you the stats. In fact, it's showing you the steps of improvement of that item. Basically, the size of the gauge is not the size of the value of your stats, it's just how much you've improved that stat, which can be very misleading. You can really think that the stat is much higher than it was in the beginning, when in fact it's not – you just improved it a lot.

We did it that way because we had feedback during our beta that players weren't really noticing the improvement. Now you can really notice the improvement, but it's giving you a wrong understanding of what the stat is, because we don't give you the value. When I said that we want to revamp the way that the stats work, the UI update is also part of it. That's one of the things that can make people say, "Hey, it's really pay to win, because of how much the stat is better in purple than it is in gray." But when you look at the UI, that's what the UI tells you, even if in the game it's not the case.

All of the things you loot and scavenge are based on your hero level. You need to play to have good items. Yes, purchasing crates will allow you to get more items, quicker, but it will always be blocked within the level of your hero. Right now, you need to be reputation one to loot the best items. You still need to play at least 30-35 hours before being able to fast track your progression. We also offer a lot of crates to the players. When we look at the stats, most of the players who max out their heroes do it without spending any money on crates. 💎

HORIZON ZERO DAWN

For years, Guerrilla Games has been synonymous with its sci-fi FPS series, Killzone. However, the studio's decision to change gears – and genres – for Horizon Zero Dawn has already proven an astounding success, selling over 2.6 million copies in less than a month. We recently spoke to the team about Horizon's intriguing world and what comes next. *by Jeff Marchiafava*

What was the most difficult aspect about transitioning from first-person shooters to a huge open-world RPG?

Jan-Bart van Beek, art director: Transitioning from [linear game design] is very hard. A designer doesn't control the variables they are used to. The player can come from any direction into an encounter, with any set of weapons, at any experience level, and from many different previous quests. He might be idly strolling about, with a full inventory of ammo. Or she might be running on empty with 20 giant machines in tow.

In the early days, when something didn't work, there was a tendency to go back to the old playbook: Try and control the player. Restrain the freedom. Limit the options. It took a while before we could shake that habit and trust the overall system of the game to allow the player to be in control. When making an open-world game, don't design the rollercoaster; design the theme park.

Aloy is an atypical protagonist for action games. What were your goals for her personality and story arc?

John Gonzalez, narrative director: Our goal was to create a complex, compelling protagonist with a deeply personal reason to explore the game's huge open world and learn its secrets. The big mysteries of Horizon's world – where did the robots come from? How did humans forget their knowledge of technology? – are tantalizing, but ultimately impersonal. If the main quest had been limited to answering those questions, it would never

have been more than a fact-finding mission. So we made sure that Aloy had skin in the game. She doesn't go questing to understand the world; she goes questing to understand where she came from and who she is.

As for her personality, we gave that a lot of thought. We knew she had to be tough. We knew she was clever. But she's also fundamentally *wounded*. Her upbringing as an outcast has deprived her of something she needs. This missing piece is, of course, what drives her quest. But it also drives her actions as she meets characters throughout the game.

One of the few criticisms lodged at Horizon is that some aspects like clearing out bandit camps and following Detective Mode-style trails are too derivative of other open-world games. What are your thoughts on this criticism?

Mathijs de Jonge, game director: It's been a big project for us and I'm really happy how it all came together. I see a lot of praise for the variety the world offers and the experience as a whole. That some parts don't shine quite as brightly as others is something that was kind of inevitable due to the scope. We are looking closely at any critiques as part of plotting out our plans for the future of Horizon.

There are eight main weapons in Horizon, but you can only assign four to the weapon wheel at a given time. Why limit the player's ability to quickly swap between weapon types?

MdJ: At some point we had more

weapons on the wheel, but the controls got in the way with how quick we wanted the switching process to be; it just got too finicky. We have some ideas on how we can improve weapon/loadout switching, but I can't share anything on this yet.

Many games sacrifice a satisfying conclusion to set up a sequel, but Horizon answers all the big mysteries it sets up. Were you afraid of hamstringing potential future narratives by revealing too much?

JG: We didn't want to play it safe and hold things back for some sequel that might never come. We wanted to tell a complete story, and that meant we were obligated to pay off the mysteries we set up. By the time you finish Horizon, you've discovered what happened to the ancient world, the purpose of the robots, why Aloy was shunned since birth, and her true origins. So yeah, if a sequel happens, we can't lean on any of that. I suppose that makes our job as writers more challenging, but challenge is good!

If a sequel happens, what's the number-one thing you would hope to change or expand on?

JG: We've been absolutely humbled by players' response to the story and their emotional connection to Aloy. Should a sequel happen, our number-one goal would be to respect that connection by doing our utmost to create a story that resonates just as deeply. We feel duty-bound to honor the time and emotion that players have invested in Horizon. The last thing we want to do is disappoint the folks who have given the game such passionate support.

JBvB: More machines. They are a lot of fun to design, build, animate, and play with. I wish we could have done a hundred. But reality is a harsh mistress; it doesn't allow you to make hundreds of machines. 💎

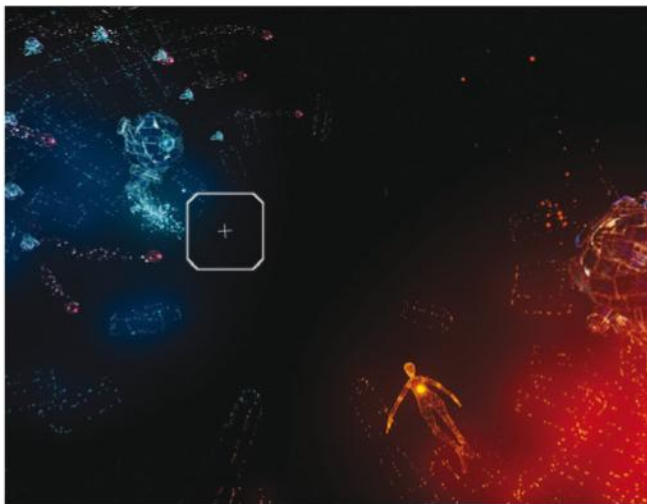


QUICK

HITS

GOOD GAMES YOU CAN BEAT
IN ONE SITTING

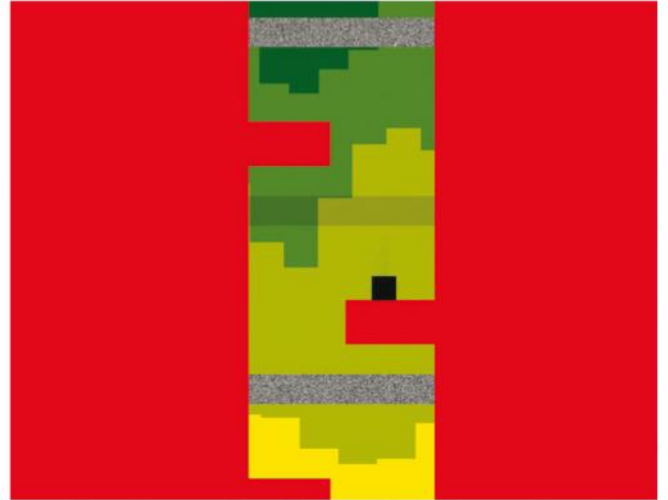
Between The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Persona 5, Mass Effect Andromeda, and Horizon Zero Dawn, 2017 is already exploding with long, sprawling games that have the potential to consume players' free time for weeks on end. While these games are all well worth your time, there's something to be said about cleansing your gaming palate between these massive adventures. Luckily, many games have the ability to not only fill that role, but also provide meaningful and entertaining experiences. Here are 10 great games you can beat in one sitting. *by Brian Shea*



✕ 140 ✕

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U • PC • Vita

From the mind of former Playdead gameplay director Jeppe Carlsen comes 140. A rhythm-based puzzle platformer, 140 is a delightful minimalistic experience that challenges players to progress through the world by interacting with and climbing on objects that move in time with the stage music. The visuals are simple, consisting entirely of geometric shapes, but the puzzles and platforming sequences ramp up in difficulty as players reach later stages. After you complete the short campaign, you unlock new mirror stages, which create fresh challenges from the stages you already completed.



✕ REZ INFINITE ✕

PlayStation VR • PS4

Rez, the rhythmic rail shooter from the mind of Tetsuya Mizuguchi, has been around for over 15 years, appearing on platforms like Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, and Dreamcast. With the latest update, Infinite, Q Entertainment added new areas to blast through, as well as a new way to get even more immersed into the musical gameplay: virtual reality. Playing Rez Infinite on PlayStation VR takes the sensory overload of the game to new levels as you surround yourself with the colorful explosions, pulsating music, and engaging gameplay that made the original so popular in the first place.

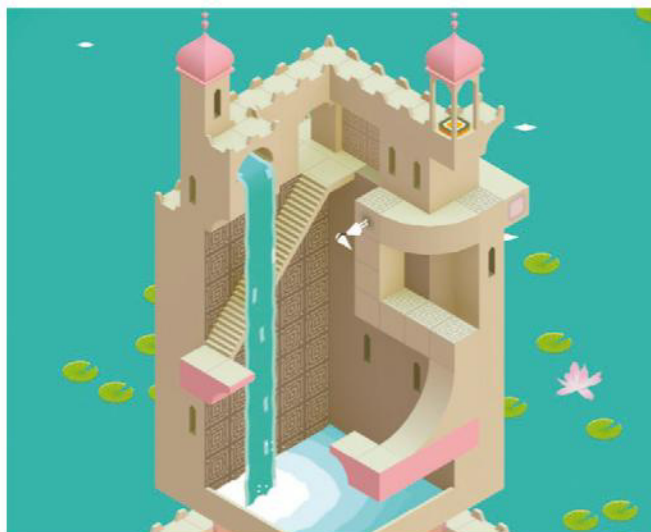


✕ SUPERHOT ✕

Xbox One • PC

Rarely do games innovate so much in established genres, but Superhot manages to do so as a first-person shooter. The concept is immediately attractive; when you stand still, so does time, enabling you to plan your next move even as you stand in the middle of multiple heavily armed enemies. Using this gameplay style, players are able to defy astronomical odds to clear out rooms that without the

time-slowing mechanic would be nearly insurmountable. At the end of each successful stage, Superhot replays your victory in real-time, showcasing your *Matrix*-like moves. The story also features some fun twists and turns. In addition to the console and PC versions, Oculus Rift and HTC Vive owners can also check out a standalone, brand-new Superhot VR campaign.



✕ MONUMENT VALLEY ✕

iOS • Android • Windows Phone

The abstract visuals, tranquil soundtrack, and compelling gameplay combine to create one of the best experiences on a mobile device. Mind-bending, perspective-based tests are the highlight of this brilliant geometric puzzler. While some of the puzzles have the potential to stump you, the solution is always right in front of your face and is immensely satisfying when you figure it out. What's better is that since it's on mobile platforms, you can play through it whether you're on a flight or in a waiting room.



✕ JOURNEY ✕

PS4 • PS3

Gorgeous visuals, an astounding soundtrack, and rewarding exploration are all reasons why you should play Journey. To top it all off, the beautiful tale woven by the game's wordless narrative is something every player should experience. In addition, coincidental multiplayer flexes interesting concepts that uniquely bring players together like two ships passing in the night. As the name implies, the ultimate goal of Journey is not what's important. The experience isn't so much about how it all wraps up, but rather the time spent getting there.

✕ FLOWER ✕

PS4 • PS3 • Vita

In Flower, you control the wind as you play through the "dreams" of flowers sitting on the windowsill of an apartment. As you push the petals through dead, brown areas, you restore them back to life. Interacting with different plants changes the world in different ways, and the musical cues make each progression feel fresh and powerful. The concept of Flower is simple, but revitalizing the nature that surrounds you – as well as seeing how that affects other parts of the world – is extremely satisfying. Featuring just six main levels and one bonus area, the experience is arguably better if you can set aside an afternoon to finish it in one sitting.



✕ GONE HOME ✕

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

In Gone Home, you arrive at your family's home to find it completely empty. You must explore the house and go through each member's personal belongings to figure out where they went. With a terrifically crafted story and rewarding exploration of the house, Gone Home is a narrative-driven treat that drives home the importance and weight of self-discovery. With the former PC-exclusive now available on most modern platforms, it's easier than ever to dive in and enjoy this beautiful and touching experience.





✕ INSIDE ✕

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Mystery abounds in Playdead's follow-up to Limbo. You take control of a nameless kid, but it soon becomes apparent that this world is anything but child's play. The hostile environments, masked pursuers, vicious dogs, and even grotesquely disturbing creatures can all spell the main character's doom. With fun platforming areas,

an enticing world to explore, and ingenious puzzles, the gameplay is enough to recommend Inside to nearly any gamer. However, the events that unfold in the narrative are the highlight. Our best advice: Set aside an evening, turn off all the lights, and avoid all distractions as you dive into this deeply unsettling world from Playdead.



✕ ABZÛ ✕

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Stepping into the flippers of a deep-sea diver leads to a serene experience in Abzû. Without worrying about the dangers associated with underwater exploration, Abzû quickly establishes itself as a meditative experience that draws players in with its stunning beauty. The gameplay isn't a heavy focus, nor is this a title that requires you to think too much, but by the time you finish the story, you feel a true connection with the world you have extensively explored. If the idea of floating among beautiful sea life sounds up your alley, Abzû is a great way to spend an evening.

✕ LARA CROFT GO ✕

PS4 • PC • Vita • iOS • Android • Windows Phone

The strategic turn-based puzzle concept from the Hitman spin-off comes to Tomb Raider. Controlling your character in the Go series is as easy as flicking your finger across your screen or tilting your analog stick. Each time you move, the hazards between you and your objective move as well. The boards and hazards all feature elements from the Tomb Raider series, so fans can feel right at home in Lara's new genre. While all three of the entries in the Go series (Deus Ex being the third) are fun, Lara Croft Go is the best, as well as the one most suited to play through in a single session. ♦





photo: Michael Foud

With Great Power

Marvel is a hit-making juggernaut, dazzling theatergoers, comic readers, and television binge-watchers alike with heroic and thought-provoking stories. In the years ahead, Marvel Games hopes console gamers sing the same praises. The studio's executive creative director, **Bill Rosemann**, is at the heart of a new initiative that pairs some of the biggest developers in video games with Marvel's most beloved heroes. We talk to Rosemann about the studio's vision and learn what we can expect from the forthcoming Guardians of the Galaxy, Spider-Man, and Avengers games.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has a defined path. All the films connect into a larger story. Can we expect a similar footprint for Marvel Games? We give our partners the freedom to tell their own stories. We don't try to

box them in and make them create a game that exists between episodes of the TV show, in between movies, or in between comic issues. We feel that would be limiting. We instead want to say to them, "We want you to tell your

original, all-new story. You are the chef of your kitchen. Here are all the ingredients: heroes, villains, locations, and items. You take those things and create your dish. We'll work along with you to create something new

and fresh.” Taking Spider-Man for example, we don’t want to force [Insomniac] to tell a story where you already know how it’s going to end, because it’s set between two films.

There will be consistency across all of our games. You will recognize S.H.I.E.L.D. and Hydra. You’ll know you’re in a Marvel Universe. “There’s Wakanda,” and “There’s Knowhere,” and “There’s Asgard,” if they happen to be in the game. So the shared things will be the locations and the items that people know are Marvel. But other than that, we want give everyone their own space to tell their own original story.

Marvel games has been around for a while, but the recent announcements with Insomniac, Telltale, Capcom, and Square Enix makes it look like a bigger push is under way.

I would say it started two years ago, looking at different types of games on mobile, PC and console, and starting from scratch. We drew a line in the sand, and said from this moment forward we’re only going to work with the best partners. We’re going to unite them with the best characters – characters they have personal attachments to and passion for. We want them to love the characters, we want them to love the game, because they’re going to spend years on it. We want them to own the game and own the vision, so that when you look at it, you know it’s an Insomniac game. You know it’s a Telltale, Capcom, or Square Enix game.

You said you give developers pieces to work with, but they have the freedom to tell their own stories. When Insomniac began developing Spider-Man, did you say, “Here’s Spider-Man,” or was it a more defined pitch like, “Here’s Spider-Man and a few villains, unite them in a story”?

We look at everything, and we offer up everything that falls in the Spider-Man universe. We are cognizant of what has come before, whether it’s film or cartoons or comics. Our job is to know everything that’s happened before, and then to know what worked in the past, what didn’t work, and what we need to be at least as good as. We know what we’re going to improve on. We want to constantly top ourselves; we’re very competitive with ourselves. We share as much reference and information as possible with our partners, but we don’t tell them what story to tell – we work with them. We sat down for hours and

days and worked and thought about what would be a cool story, what would be an amazing experience, what locations would be awesome, and what villains might be great in the story. That’s where it all starts: story. Just words, ideas, themes. Everything grows from there.

You want to work with the best developers. Do you have a wish list of studios paired with specific Marvel properties, or have you been approached by companies wanting to work with you?

Each situation is different. We’re all gamers. We’re all fans. We play everything, and we’re looking at everything. We talk about, “Did you see that game? See what they did well? Look at this new gameplay, look how great this looks! They might be great for this.”

We sometimes reach out to partners, but often – and we’re very lucky in this way – thanks to Marvel’s success in all other mediums, people are knocking on our door. It’s a combination of us reaching out and people reaching out to us. Sometimes it’s a surprise to know who’s available. Some of it is just planets aligning and stars getting into formation, and it all clicks and people are available and they love a certain character and the character’s available and boom.

Speaking of who is available, Marvel Studios doesn’t have access to every character due to deals with other film companies that were worked out years ago. What about Marvel Games? Could the Avengers have Wolverine or Cyclops on the team?

I would say Marvel Games functions within the Marvel family, and thus some characters are available and some are not available. When the situation arises, depending on which characters are available, that gives us the chance to go really deep and shine the light on characters that might not necessarily get the spotlight. Show the world, like, “You may not know Cloak and Dagger, but now, they are going to be in this TV show and they’re going to be awesome!” It creates this space and allows us to elevate characters that wouldn’t normally get the time to shine.

Everyone knows of The Avengers and Spider-Man. Is the push in the game space right now mostly the heavy hitters, or are you looking deep at that bench and taking chances like Marvel Studios did with *Ant-Man*?

When it comes to the console space, definitely. We’re looking at everything. Having said that, I think we have a responsibility to deliver those popular characters that everyone wants. Two years ago we said, “Okay, we have to do Spider-Man. We have to do Guardians, and Avengers.” We’re starting there, but I would say even within those games, without revealing any character rosters, we’ll go as deep as possible within those families. Don’t be surprised to see some deep cuts in each individual game.

Can we expect to see any overlap between Marvel’s comics, games, and cinematic efforts, or are you trying to keep them separate moving forward?

We’re doing that with our live ops games. Those are games where we want a constant flow of new content, and to incorporate all the lines of [Marvel’s] business. Film, TV (both live action and animation), publishing, and to make sure that we’re introducing the right characters at the right time. By that I mean someone on one of our partner’s teams may be a big Iron Fist fan, and they want to have Iron Fist in the game in the month of November. We would say, “Hey, we have an Iron Fist show coming to Netflix. If you wait until that month, he can come out in the game at the same time the show hits, and people will love it!” It’s a lot of that; making sure we’re all synced up. We’re working with my friends in other divisions, and then giving us the reference to our partners.

For Spider-Man, Insomniac is developing and Sony is publishing. Where does Marvel Games fit into this equation?

We’re active collaborators. That means different things to different studios. We don’t want to change how they make games and how they function. We want to help them as much as possible. So that might mean having in-depth story meetings and providing all sorts of reference material. Also, being there as a sounding board, and just being in contact with most of our partners pretty much on a daily basis. For Insomniac, they’re 10 minutes away. We’re over there once a week. We’re doing everything we can for them to help them deliver their vision.

We know of four console games in development right now. Can we expect more announcements in 2017 or is this it?

Our kitchen is very busy (laughs). There are pots on all the burners, so I can’t reveal anything. As Stan Lee would say, “Stay tuned, True Believer!”

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1993

Rosemann begins writing feature articles for *Marvel Age* magazine

1994

Rosemann becomes copywriter for *Marvel Previews*

2002

Rosemann writes the critically acclaimed Marvel miniseries *Deadline*

2006

After runs at rival publishers CrossGen and DC Comics, Rosemann is recruited back to Marvel to edit the company’s cosmic line

2007

Rosemann hand-picks Star-Lord, Mantis, Rocket Raccoon, and Groot from obscurity to unite the band of misfits in *Annihilation Conquest*

2008

Adding Drax and Gamora to Star-Lord’s crew, Rosemann launches the new monthly series *Guardians of the Galaxy*

2008-14

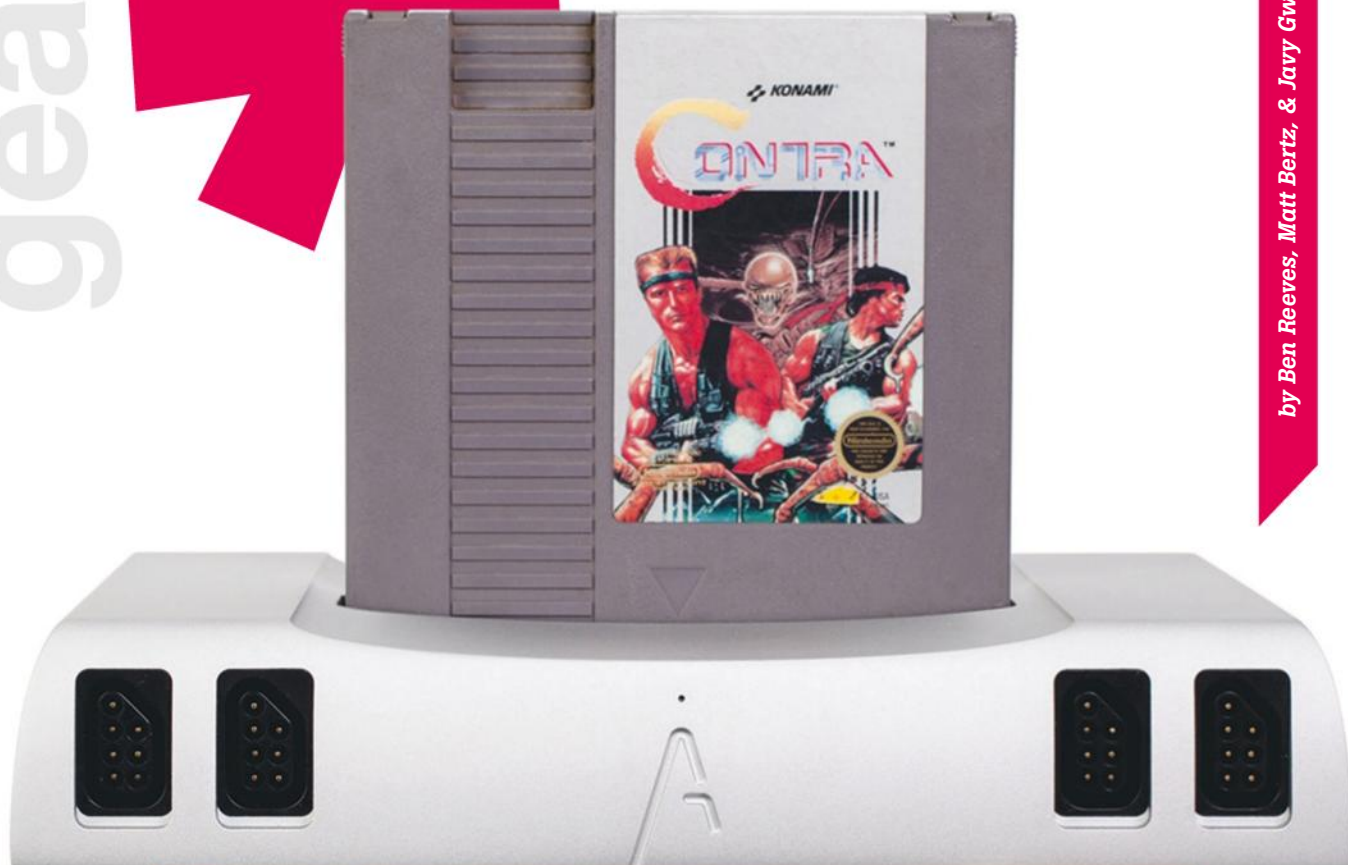
Rosemann edits dozens of comic-book series, including *Black Panther*, *Black Widow*, *Inhumans*, *Nova*, *The Thanos Imperative* and *Rocket Raccoon & Groot*

2014

Joining the Marvel Games division as creative director, Rosemann helps launch multiple mobile games, including *Contest of Champions*, *Future Fight* and *Avengers Academy*

2017

Rosemann is named executive creative director as Marvel Games announces several upcoming console titles



by Ben Reeves, Matt Bertz, & Javy Gwaltney

ANALOG NT MINI NES CONSOLE

1 The Analog Nt Mini is the ultimate classic gaming console for modern televisions. Designed and manufactured using only high-end parts and encased in a solid anodized aluminum shell, the Analog Nt Mini looks stunning and feels sturdier than even modern consoles. An Altera Cyclone V integrated circuit design makes the Mini 20-percent smaller than Analog's previous systems, while ensuring that the console is 100-percent compatible with every NES and Famicom game. It also accommodates all the systems' accessories you might have collected since the '80s.

Every game we tested on the Nt Mini worked flawlessly. Better still, old NES games look better on Analog's system thanks to a lag-less 1080p output that features zero signal degradation. The 8Bitdo's NES30 wireless controller that comes bundled with the system allows for wireless play without sacrificing any of the nostalgic feel of an old NES controller. The 8Bitdo controller even works with old NES systems, which is a neat bonus.

Analog's Nt Mini is a high-end system with a high-end price tag, but for those who are willing to drop the cash, classic gaming doesn't get any better.

VERY GOOD 
\$499 | analogue.co

2 Turtle Beach Flyte Backpack

Taking your gaming setup on the go can be a hassle – most bags are too big or small, and almost none keep your gear snug and safe. Turtle Beach and EGL teamed up to solve this problem with the Flyte. This durable, military grade nylon backpack was engineered from the zipper down with gamers in mind, featuring dedicated pockets for your console, headset, laptop, controllers, cords, games, and even full-sized keyboard and mice. The padded shoulder straps and compression molding along the back help you manage the weight, and the ballistic-grade nylon features a water-resistant coating to keep the elements away from your electronics.

\$129 | turtlebeach.com



2

3



3 Eyezen Digital Protective Eyewear

Excessive exposure to ultra-violet and blue light, which are found in backlit screens and other artificial lighting sources, can damage your eyes and keep you awake at night. If you're worried about your vision, check out EyeBuyDirect's new line of protective eyewear. The company sells a variety of chic styles that take design cues from contemporary architecture and can accommodate any prescription.

Starting at \$25 | eyebuydirect.com

4



4 Steelseries Arctis 3

Steelseries has a reputation for making affordable, quality headsets. The Arctis 3 upholds that tradition marvelously, with an understated design that is both comfy and produces loud, clear 7.1 surround audio. The retractable microphone is also solid, capable of clearly communicating your commands and requests in multiplayer games. An easy-to-reach volume adjuster and mute button on the left headphone makes customizing your audio experience easy. You can also buy optional headband replacements if you want a different color than the gray one that comes in the box. This wired headset works right out of the box with PC, PS4, and Xbox One.

\$79.99 | steelseries.com



PLAYING WITH PORTABLE POWER

A final verdict on Nintendo's Switch

Last month, we detailed our extensive hands-on impressions of Nintendo's new console. Now that the system has officially released and we've had considerable playtime with the launch lineup, we're ready to deliver our final verdict. Should the Switch's lackluster launch library and a problematic, experimental controller keep you away from Nintendo's new hardware? Or does the new *Zelda* and the promise of a portable console overshadow its flaws?

by Ben Reeves

Nintendo's latest hardware offers a lot to love. The Switch is possibly the sleekest console Nintendo has ever designed. We love its smooth, minimalist design and crisp, 720p screen. Jumping between the TV and the

Switch's handheld mode works even better than we imagined, and having a portable console is convenient. We appreciate being able to avoid noisy living rooms, or playing *Zelda* from our bed on a Saturday morning.

Unfortunately, one of the Switch's biggest selling points leaves us with mixed feelings. The pack-in controller, which divides into two separate Joy-Cons, feels like a compromise. We love the flexibility of the controller; playing with the Switch on an airplane or at the park is incredibly liberating, and we enjoyed being able to play two-player games like *Snipperclips* using the individual Joy-Cons as separate controllers. Unfortunately, the Joy-Cons by themselves are uncomfortable to hold for any length of time. The experience is improved when these tiny controllers combine into a single unit using the packed-in Joy-Con grip, but the tiny buttons and slightly odd shape still left us going back to Nintendo's Pro Controller (sold separately for \$70).

In the past, Nintendo's online features seemed limited

compared to other gaming systems. With the Switch, however, Nintendo plans to offer a paid subscription service, which players must join to take part in online play. It seems Nintendo is moving in the right direction, but the company's current approach to this online rollout hasn't inspired us. The current contacts list functionality is extremely limited, and adding new friends is a complicated affair thanks to the continued use of friend codes. We're also skeptical about Nintendo's needlessly convoluted online voice chat functionality, which is being offloaded to a mobile app that won't be available until later this summer. Nintendo's online strategy remains a mystery, as the service won't officially roll out until fall. To date, only a few Switch games, such as *Super Bomberman R*, offer limited online play.



After putting our Switch through the wringer for only a few weeks, we noticed some significant design flaws. The system itself feels sturdy, but the locks that keep each Joy-Con attached to the Switch break easily, and we experienced several problems with the little controllers sliding off their tablet mounts during play. The screen is also made of plastic instead of glass, which means it scratches more easily than standard tablets and smartphones. A screen protector or travel case is a must when taking the Switch on the road.

Finally, we've experienced a few Joy-Con connection issues, where the controllers briefly lose sync with the system in the middle of gameplay. These sync issues vary depending on location, but if your Switch is set up near other electronics or your

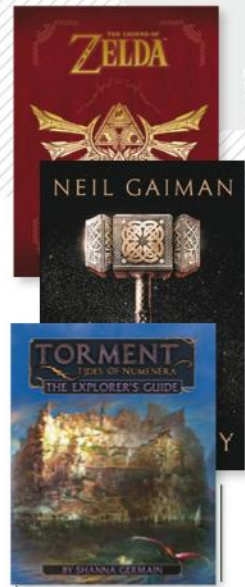
home is a hotspot for wireless activity then you may experience connection problems.

Whether you should buy a Switch this early into its lifecycle is up to you. Nintendo's release lineup doesn't have much going for it other than *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, so if you aren't interested in Link's newest adventure, you might

want to wait until the Switch's library has grown. Plus, if you already own a Wii U, you can play Nintendo's hot new release without buying a new console. However, for anyone who loves the idea of having a console in their pocket and can put up with a few flaws, the Nintendo Switch is a promising piece of technology.

The Final Grade: C

Nintendo isn't afraid of thinking outside the box, but it feels like the company made major compromises for the Switch. The individual Joy-Cons are so small they leave you with hand cramps, and even when combined with the Joy-Con grip, they feel unnatural. A general lack of online functionality and a lackluster launch lineup also have us wondering if Nintendo rushed to get the Switch on store shelves. We're happy with the tablet's overall design, and transitioning from a television console to handheld mode works like magic. We love the Switch's promise, but Nintendo and its third-party partners still need to prove that the unique features are more than just gimmicks. 💎



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ART & ARTIFACTS

With *Breath of the Wild* tapping into the series' roots, it's a great time to look back at the art from across the entire franchise history. This gorgeous art book includes official character designs, game box art, instruction booklet illustrations, and interviews with *Zelda*'s artists, all printed on oversized, high-quality paper.

\$39.99
darkhorse.com

NORSE MYTHOLOGY BY NEIL GAIMAN

If everything you know about Norse Mythology comes from comic books, then you don't know the real legends. Hugo and Nebula award-winning author Neil Gaiman (*Sandman*, *American Gods*) retells the ancient myths about Thor, Odin, and Loki using his grim, poetic prose.

\$25.95
neilgaiman.com

TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA – THE EXPLORER'S GUIDE

If the weird and surreal world of *Torment* captured your imagination, this RPG sourcebook is your next stop. This book is ideal both for players of the *Numenera* tabletop RPG or fans of the universe who want to dive deeper down the rabbit hole.

\$39.99
montecookgames.com



GAME RELEASES

Friday 05

- › Prey (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶

Tuesday 09

- › Birthdays: The Beginning (PS4, PC)
- › Rime (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❷

Tuesday 16

- › Injustice 2 (PS4, Xbox One)

Friday 19

- › Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows of Valentia (3DS)

Tuesday 30

- › Don't Starve Mega Pack (PS4, Xbox One)



GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 03

Secret Empire ❸

Captain America has long been the symbol of patriotism and America, but it turns out his allegiance lies with Hydra. In the first issue of *Secret Empire*, we see how the Marvel Universe reacts to Steve Rogers' betrayal, and who else may secretly be on his side. *Secret Empire* is written by Nick Spencer, and features art by Steve McNiven.

Saturday 06

Free Comic Book Day

Head to your local comic book retailer today for free comic books. Most major comic book companies are offering a variety of comics (over 50 in total), and you can grab one of each. The books available this year range from *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* to video game adaptations of *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* and *Street Fighter V*.

Thursday 25

Southwest Video Game Showcase

Running in conjunction with Phoenix Comic Con, the Southwest Video Game Showcase is a four-day expo held in the city's convention center. Along with game panels and tournaments, you have the chance to meet and get autographs from various celebrities including Kevin Conroy (*Batman*), Alan Tudyk (*Rogue One*), and Ming-Na Wen (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*)

Thursday 25

Mega Con

Over 100,000 people attended last year's Mega Con Expo, held in the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Fla. This year's show celebrates all things games, comics, horror, anime, and science fiction. The show runs for four days and features a variety of panels and guests, along with cosplay competitions and shopping galore. ❹

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Monday 01

- › Lucifer (Fox)

Friday 05

- › Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 (theaters)

Friday 19

- › Alien: Covenant (theaters)
- › Baywatch (theaters)
- › Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (Netflix)

Sunday 21

- › Twin Peaks (Showtime)

Friday 26

- › Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales (theaters)
- › Life (theaters)

Tuesday 30

- › House of Cards (Netflix)





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» platform
PS4 • PC
» style
1-Player Action
» publisher
Ninja Theory
» developer
Ninja Theory
» release
2017

A STAB IN THE DAVE

NINJA THEORY EXPLORES THE NIGHTMARES OF THE
MIND IN HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

by Ben Reeves

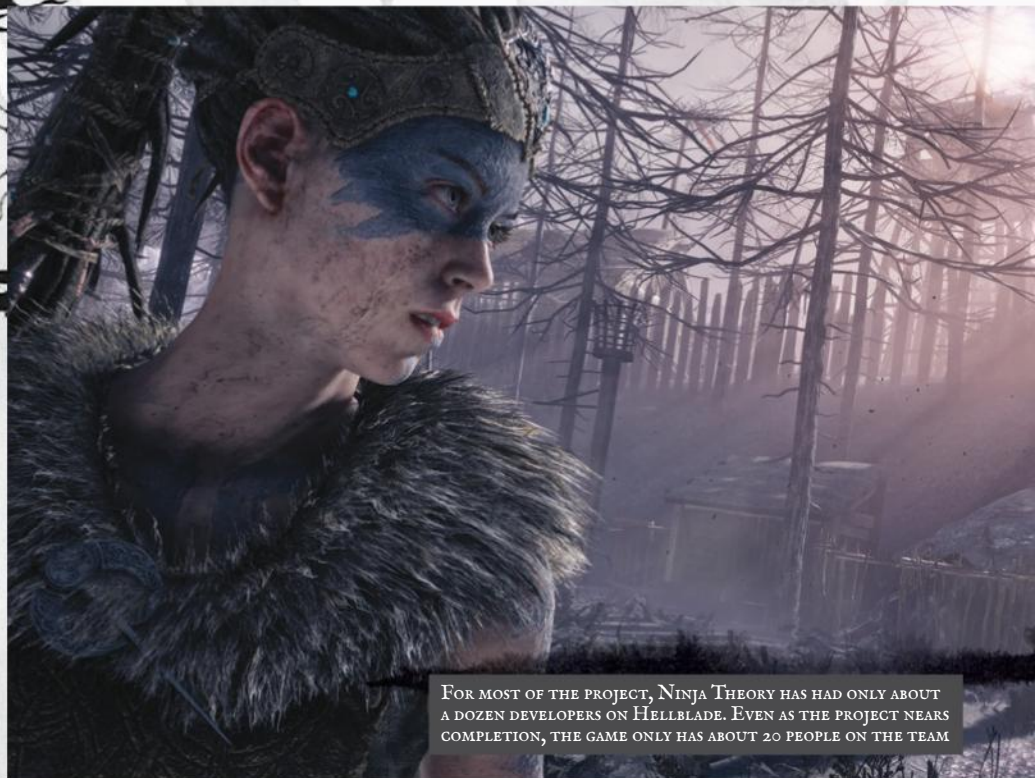


THE



Her raft carves through the fog with purpose. She is not an imposing figure. She is neither commanding nor fearsome, and yet she is ready to cut through an army of Viking demons as she journeys to bargain with a god. Her name is Senua, and she is a Celtic warrior with nothing left to lose. The pouch on her belt contains the head of her deceased lover – a physical reminder of the painful task before her. As she takes her first steps onto the shores of hell, she knows there is no turning back.

After developing big-budget games like *Heavenly Sword*, *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West*, and *DMC*, developer Ninja Theory is doing the unexpected – intentionally trimming its budget to a fraction of what traditional developers need to complete a game. Not quite indie, not quite triple-A, *Hellblade* is a video game oddity. With its release, Ninja Theory hopes to give fans a memorable narrative-focused experience while proving traditional publishers' "go big or go home" ethos wrong.



FOR MOST OF THE PROJECT, NINJA THEORY HAS HAD ONLY ABOUT A DOZEN DEVELOPERS ON HELLBLADE. EVEN AS THE PROJECT NEARS COMPLETION, THE GAME ONLY HAS ABOUT 20 PEOPLE ON THE TEAM

Development Hell

Ninja Theory is no stranger to big challenges. The development of the team's first game, *Heavenly Sword*, nearly pushed creative director Tameem Antoniades to a breaking point. The troubles began early. Antoniades' original company, Just Add Monsters, had built an early prototype for an Eastern fantasy-themed action game it called *Heavenly Sword*, but the studio had difficulty selling the concept to publishers.

A few months into development, the team discovered why no one would touch their project. The studio's parent company, Argonaut Games, was on the verge of financial collapse. Antoniades and his fellow co-founders had a matter of weeks to scramble together their savings, re-mortgage their homes, and buy the concepts and rights to *Heavenly Sword* from their imploding parent company. Just Add Monsters and Argonaut Games both flamed out, but out of their ashes, Ninja Theory was

born. Antoniades knew if his fledgling company was going to succeed, it needed to sell *Heavenly Sword* to a publisher, and quickly. Unfortunately, only one company was left that hadn't heard the pitch: Sony.

"We had only a prototype on PC and some tech exploring the combat," Antoniades says. "But because the PlayStation 3 was coming out surprisingly soon, Sony was eager for games. They saw our concept and went, 'Great. We'll take it...Run!'"

In less than a year, Ninja Theory grew from a group of 20 developers to a studio of nearly 100. Antoniades felt a great deal of pressure to build the studio's own internal game engine from scratch while crafting an entirely new IP full of impressive production values. Add in the usual growing pains of a new studio, and it's not hard to see why the stress of the project kept the team up at night.

"Those PS3 development kits were a nightmare, and we were all like, 'This machine isn't like anything else,'" Antoniades says. "It was ultra-hardcore to program for, and the hardware kept changing, constantly changing, even months before the final system was out...I woke up screaming in the night at one point, because I was under so much pressure. The stress of the whole thing just caught up with me."

Fortunately, Ninja Theory delivered *Heavenly Sword* to Sony on budget and on time. *Heavenly Sword* reviewed well, receiving praise for its pioneering work in performance capture, a feat it achieved thanks to the help of Hollywood mainstays like Andy Serkis and Weta Digital.

Unfortunately, when Ninja Theory signed the publishing deal with Sony, it relinquished its game-engine technology as well as the rights

to *Heavenly Sword*. When Sony tasked a different studio with developing the never-released sequel to *Heavenly Sword*, Ninja Theory was forced to go back to the drawing board.

After working on projects like *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* with publisher Bandai Namco and the *Devil May Cry* reboot, DMC, with Capcom, the studio felt like it had built a name for itself as a developer that cared about narrative-driven games with a focus on quality action.

Ninja Theory is incredibly proud of its work over the years, but like many studios in the industry, it hasn't retained the rights to any of the projects it has worked on, which left the team constantly looking for new ideas to pitch. At the same time, the bar to succeed in the games industry has slowly risen with each successive console generation. While one million in sales was considered a hit on the PS One, a studio needed to sell two million copies of a game to be considered a success on the PS2, and then three million copies on the PS3.

"Many of the games that stand out for me aren't necessarily the really big ones," Antoniades says. "They're the games that have something special or individual about them, games like *Ico*, *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*, or *Jet Set Radio*. It's slightly unnerving to think that those games would never get greenlit in this day and age of go-big-or-go-home, triple-A blockbusters that have to sell three million just to justify their existence."

As Ninja Theory looked at the ever-expanding nature of the game industry, the studio felt its next project would have to sell upwards of five million copies to be considered a success on the PS4 or Xbox One. Antoniades began to wonder if there was another way to approach game development.



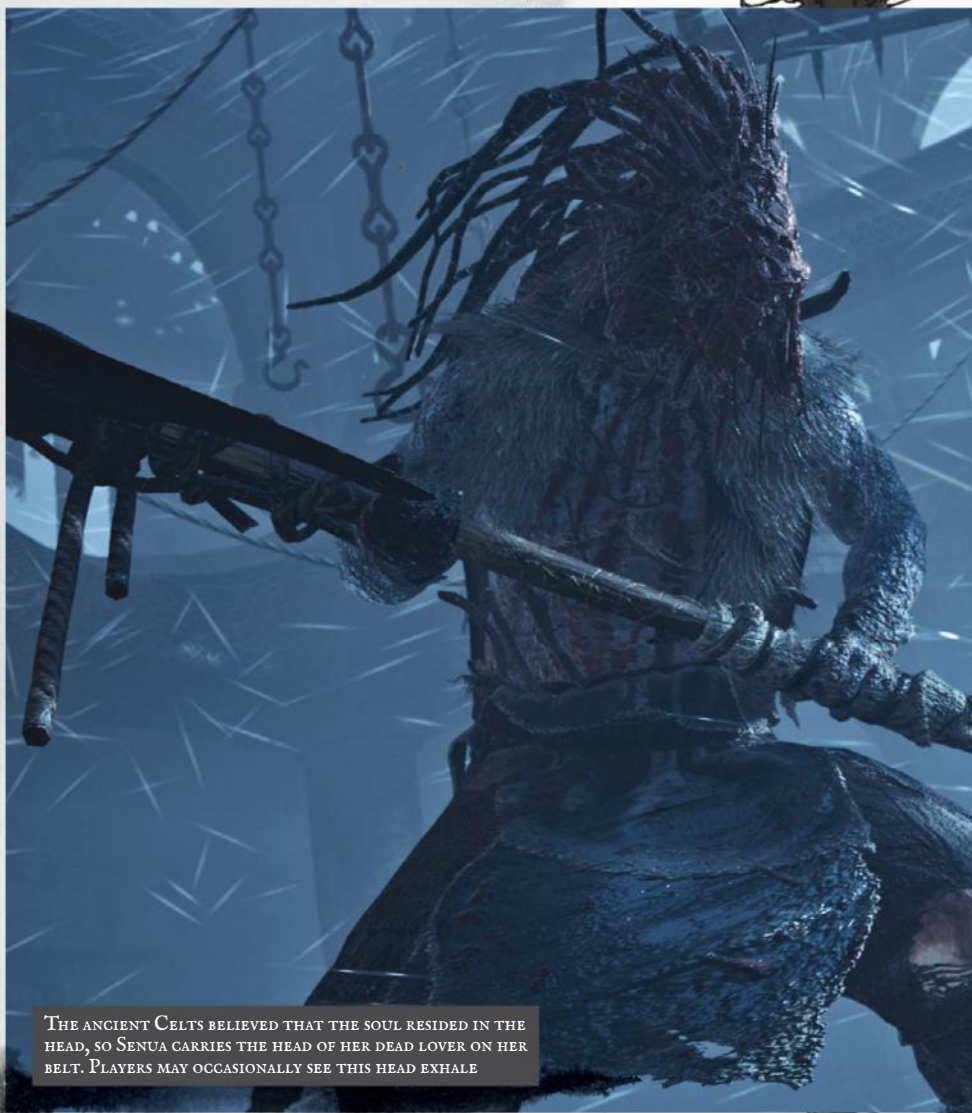
Development Done Differently

Antoniades became disillusioned with game publishing early on in his career. Before founding Ninja Theory, the young developer was asked to put together a pitch for a game about Bruce Lee, giving him his first glimpse into the frustrating process.

"I thought, 'Wow! Bruce Lee. This can be great,'" Antoniades says. "You can create the whole story around his life and childhood with key fights, almost like an interactive documentary. I thought that it could be groundbreaking. That's what I pitched, but what I got back was that, 'The demographic that likes Bruce Lee are predominantly black, and black people are into hip-hop, so this game is going to have a hip-hop vibe. And we want some time-travel elements, so Bruce can go back to ancient Japan.' I was thinking, 'What the f--- does Japan have to do with Bruce Lee?'...Ever since then, I've thought that these people who you think know what they're talking about, some of them just don't know what the hell they're doing."

Antoniades was reminded of this exchange as he continued to pitch new ideas as part of Ninja Theory. After shipping DMC, the studio explored a couple of options for its next project. The team dabbled in mobile development, releasing a game called Fightback, a beat 'em up iOS and Android game that – despite receiving favorable reviews – failed to generate much income.

Around the same time, Ninja Theory invested a great deal of creative energy on a project called Razer. The vision for the game was a mix of melee action and gunplay as tens of thousands of players from around the world joined together online to fight a massive, ever-adapting monster over the course of months and even years. Ninja Theory hoped to combine its desire for narrative-driven gameplay with next-gen art and technology while adding functionality like smartphone integration and online multiplayer, which seemed important to publishers. However, as Ninja Theory shopped the project around the industry, it felt like the checklist of features that publishers wanted from a big-budget release continued to grow. Even a medium-size studio like Ninja Theory had trouble keeping up with



THE ANCIENT CELTS BELIEVED THAT THE SOUL RESIDED IN THE HEAD, SO SENUA CARRIES THE HEAD OF HER DEAD LOVER ON HER BELT. PLAYERS MAY OCCASIONALLY SEE THIS HEAD EXHALE

the desires of most big-name publishers, and Razer was never officially greenlit.

"Publishers are in their jobs because they want to make money, so they look for commercial reasons for saying 'yes' or 'no' to a project," Antoniades says. "It's rarely, 'That's a great idea! We should do it on the merits of that idea.' And I don't blame them, because if you can't break even until you've sold several million units then almost any decision you make to compromise that is frightening."

Antoniades thinks the game industry used to take chances on more creative projects with modest budgets. Now, that space has largely given way to indie developers, and as Antoniades points out, these don't usually contain the same level of polish or have the same emphasis on production values as a big-box publisher might demand. Exploring this vanishing middle class within game development seemed intriguing to Ninja Theory.

As Ninja Theory researched the alternatives to traditional publishing, it learned that digital distribution was growing year-after-year. The studio felt if it kept its production costs low and self-published a game digitally then it might be able to fund a project itself. The studio believed

it could bring its expertise in storytelling, motion capture, and high-end graphics to a smaller, indie-like game that looked more like a project from a big-budget studio. The team calculated that a game like this would only need to sell around 200,000 to 300,000 copies to be profitable.

"If we can keep our costs super low, we might have a chance," Antoniades says. "Tools like Unreal are getting so much better at empowering developers to do things quickly. The industry might be at that tipping point where we can create high quality at a low cost."

While a larger portion of the studio continued to bring in money by working on games like Disney Infinity 3.0 and other unannounced projects, Antoniades led a guerrilla team of developers on an experiment that he hopes will eventually pave a new path for game developers across the industry. The most logical concept for this bold new project would be to explore some of the same concepts that had put Ninja Theory on the map. Ninja Theory decided to make a spiritual sequel to Heavenly Sword. However, that journey back in time quickly evolved into something much more interesting.



WHY NINJA THEORY DOESN'T SEE HELLBLADE AS INDIE

"I think there are different expectations from the word 'indie,'" says Ninja Theory creative director Tameem Antoniades. "They aren't bad expectations. I see indie as a place to explore ideas that are very different and cool, but generally the production values don't matter. Indie games can be very stylized, but they're not supposed to look like triple-A games. What we want to do is take our triple-A experience and package it in a different way. Something more like indie, but not. It seems weird to call it an indie game when it doesn't look like one, and people don't see us as an indie developer."





Flight Of Western Fantasy

Ninja Theory had explored Eastern fantasy with *Heavenly Sword*, so Antoniades wanted to delve into a different flavor of fantasy for the project he had already dubbed *Hellblade*. Western fantasy tropes felt overused, but the developer thought that Celtic and Norse legends might provide a fun hook for a game. However, Antoniades sensed he needed one additional element to help bring this concept into focus.

"I came across this Reddit thread on psychosis around the same time I read *Don Quixote* for the first time," Antoniades says. "This got me thinking, 'Where does fantasy really come from?' It comes from – not necessarily a form of madness – but from your mind creating realities that don't exist, and sometimes, in extreme cases, that can be madness."

Inspired by an article about a recent archaeological discovery of a previously unknown Romano-British goddess named Senua, Antoniades began to dream about the life of this woman. He jotted down notes about a young Celtic warrior and her journey into legend.

In Ninja Theory's fictional account, Senua is a member of the Pict people. The Picts were an early medieval Celtic clan who lived in eastern and northern Scotland. The Romans actually named them, because they were a very pictorial people, often painting their naked bodies before battle and adding lime to their hair, which gave them dreadlocks.

Ninja Theory's version of Senua's story takes place around 790 AD, which is during the same time the Vikings invaded the Orkney Islands in Scotland, wiping the Picts from the pages of history. In *Hellblade*, Senua is far from an ordinary Pict. She is a young woman who has struggled with schizophrenia her whole life. Thanks to the help of her lover Dillion, she is able to work through many of her psychotic episodes and remain functional.

"We've read reports of people who drink water and it tastes wrong or rotten," Antoniades says. "We've added things like that into her backstory. All the signs of psychosis are there, as is the fear and the darkness she's struggled with her

NINJA THEORY CONSULTED WITH SEVERAL PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED PSYCHOSIS AND SCHIZOPHRENIA TO HELP TELL SENUA'S STORY



whole life. She's been able to overcome these things, until the point when the Vikings arrive and wipe out everybody. From then on, there's no going back. There is no world to hold onto. She's going straight into hell, and the darkest parts of her mind."

As Senua slips into madness, she remembers a man named Druth, whom she met when she was much younger. Druth was another Celtic warrior who was captured and enslaved by Vikings for several years. After his escape, Druth befriends Senua and shares the tales of his torment. Senua's encounter with Druth is relevant, because he is the first person in her life who is able to understand her madness.

Like most people who suffer psychosis, Senua easily makes connections between

things that aren't necessarily linked. As a result, Senua comes to believe that the Vikings and their goddess Hela are connected to the darkness she has battled her whole life. When the Vikings invade her homeland, they murder her entire village and ritually sacrifice her lover to their god Hela.

Because of her psychosis, Senua believes that in order to save her lover she must travel to Hela's domain – a place called the Land of Mist and Fog, otherwise known as Niflheim or Hel. Since the Celts believed that the soul lives in the head, Senua carries the head of her lover with her on this journey to an encounter with a god. Her whole quest is to retrieve her lover's soul, and she doesn't care how many Vikings she must cut through on that journey.



VOICES IN HER HEAD

Disembodied voices sound like a trope, but auditory hallucination is a common schizophrenic phenomenon. Senua has a number of voices in her head and they talk to her throughout her journey. Sometimes they help expound on the story or provide additional background on Senua's life. At other times, these voices help Senua navigate the environment.

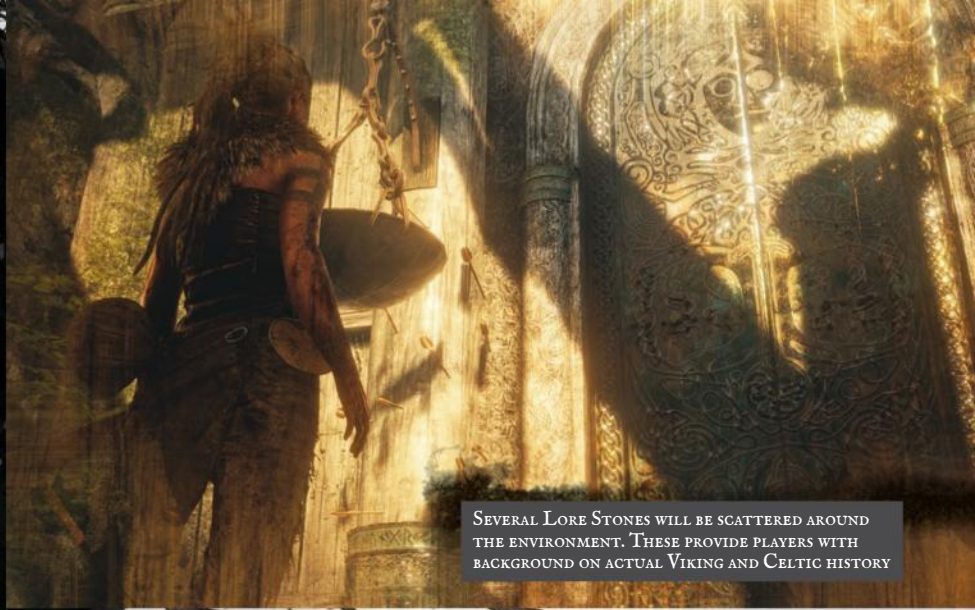
Some of Senua's voices are based on people that she knew in real life. For example, the ex-Viking slave Druth talks to Senua through her adventure, constantly expounding on Viking lore. Other voices are a fusion of multiple people. A voice simply known as Shadow is a negative entity who is an amalgamation of Senua's father and other pessimistic authority figures from her past.

In addition to these named voices, Senua also hears the rantings of a chorus of voices called the Furies. These Furies are constantly telling Senua what to do, but they are not always right. For example, in one sequence, while Senua is trying to navigate a maze, many of the Furies might tell her to, "Go right." At the same time, Senua might hear another small voice whisper, "No. Go left." These Furies are intended to help express the fact that Senua is lost and confused, and that she won't always be able to trust everything she hears.

Guerilla Game Development

As Ninja Theory built out the concepts for Hellblade, it started to look into ways to trim development costs. In order to create a game with an indie spirit and high-production values, Ninja Theory knew it would have to be resourceful, finding creative solutions to traditional development problems.

Instead of crafting combat animations by hand, Ninja Theory took motion-capture data from Hollywood stunt doubles and dropped it into the game. In order to create the paint patterns on Senua's skin, the studio applied paint to paper and scanned it into their computers. To help further cut costs, Ninja Theory decided to create only one high-quality character model: Senua herself. This meant Ninja Theory wouldn't



SEVERAL LORE STONES WILL BE SCATTERED AROUND THE ENVIRONMENT. THESE PROVIDE PLAYERS WITH BACKGROUND ON ACTUAL VIKING AND CELTIC HISTORY



have the resources to create NPCs for Senua to interact with throughout the game. Fortunately, after some visual experiments, the team discovered it could blend live-action video sequences with gameplay. Using post-processing filters to mask this video, Ninja Theory has added a few flashback sequences.

This style of guerrilla game development sometimes led to dead ends. For example, at one point, the team took satellite data of the Scottish Isles and tried to adapt it for an open-world game environment. Unfortunately, the team found designing a narrative around this type of world was too challenging, so it went back to designing Hellblade's environments by hand. At another point in development, the team scanned a female bodybuilder, which it hoped to use as Senua's character model. However, it ended up looking awkward when attached to the head of the actress they chose for Senua's face and voice, so they scrapped that data as well.

Thankfully, in many areas, the team achieved professional results using their own homebrew equipment. For about the price of a cheap

smartcar, Ninja Theory turned its boardroom into a makeshift motion capture space. This has allowed the team to continually iterate on the narrative month after month, and has saved a fortune in motion capture work. Ninja Theory recognizes this as a luxury, as in-house motion-capture studios are a rarity even for many big-budget game studios.

"The spirit of constraint has forced us to find new solutions and question how things are done as we find new ways to do them," Antoniadou says. "If money was no object, we would've just made this game the traditional way, and, in some ways, it probably would've been less interesting."

Hellblade's narrative focus meant the team needed to work closely with an actress who could be on call regularly. A few weeks before the studio was prepared to spend tens of thousands of dollars to have a professional actress scanned into the game, their actress was offered a role on an unnamed Netflix project, which conflicted with Hellblade's schedule. The actress backed out of her agreement with Ninja Theory, which left the team in a jam.

"I knew that this would happen, because it's happened before on other projects," Antoniades says. "I was really paranoid, 'Okay, I lost her. Are we going to keep the next one? How long is this going to go on for?' We had so much R&D into our motion capture space. There was no turning back."

A possible solution presented itself in an unorthodox place. Throughout *Hellblade's* production, Ninja Theory's in-house video editor, Melina Juergens, had been standing in as Senua for test motion-capture sessions. Juergens had no professional acting experience, and was extremely hesitant to officially take on the role. However, during pre-production, Juergens grew to understand Senua, and Antoniades believed she could play the role.

"On the surface, it was risky to use Melina, but it was less risky than to spend time prepping someone that didn't know how to do this," Antoniades says. "The original concept for the character was quite strong and a bit older, and

Melina is petite and young, which changed the character in some ways, but I don't mind it. I actually quite like that she looks vulnerable. Her strength doesn't come from muscles, it comes from persistence."

Ninja Theory's experiments started to bear fruit, but it still needed to bring all of its talents together into a game that people would want to play. Now that Ninja Theory knew what Senua looked like on the outside, it needed to continue to explore what she looked like on the inside.

Playing With Perception

In order to accurately portray a character struggling with psychosis, Ninja Theory knew it would have to team up with mental health experts. Early in development, the team reached out to Paul Fletcher, a psychiatrist and professor of Health Neuroscience at the University of Cambridge. Professor Fletcher gave the team a great deal of background on the science of psychosis, and connected the team with Wellcome Trust, the world's largest medical research charity. Using these connections, Ninja Theory met with a number of mental-health-services users who were willing to share their stories and experiences.

"We all think that when we peer at reality that it's all laid out in front of us, but actually we are experiencing a bunch of binary messages in our nerve endings that are highly complex and noisy and ambiguous," Fletcher says. "Somehow we assemble these messages into our internal model of the world. What's

happening a lot of the time [with those who deal with psychosis] is that perception itself is a controlled hallucination."

Human perception is a complicated field, and the brain is a complex organism that uses several tricks to help us make sense of the world around us. In fact, most optical illusions prey on the tricks that the human brain uses to parse all the data coming in from our five senses as we perceive the world. Those who wrestle with psychosis usually experience a breakdown somewhere along this line of perception, and



EXPERIMENTS WITH COMBAT

Early in *Hellblade's* development, Ninja Theory experimented with a variety of combat systems. The studio wanted to find different ways to portray Senua's psychosis while she was in the middle of a fight. One of the team's experiments allowed Senua to create multiple versions of herself, which she could use to attack enemies. Ultimately, Ninja Theory abandoned this concept, but not because it didn't work.

"I think some of that stuff felt thematically wrong," says Ninja Theory creative director Tameem Antoniades. "Splitting into different characters is a common misconception of schizophrenia. It's something that the community of service users and people experiencing psychosis are constantly battling against. So, some of that felt like we were going down the wrong road. We decided that experimenting with perception and becoming super aware of your surroundings is something we should bring into the action."



TO TELL *HELLBLADE'S* STORY, NINJA THEORY TAPPED INTO MANY OF THE ANCIENT NORSE MYTHS THAT ALSO INSPIRED STORIES LIKE *GEORGE AND THE DRAGON* AND *THE SWORD IN THE STONE*



the chaos of signals filtering into their brain gets repackaged as an altered form of reality.

With *Hellblade*, Ninja Theory wants to be respectful to those who wrestle with psychosis, and accurately portray psychotic experiences to players. To that end, Senua believes she is entering Hel and battling a series of monstrous creatures, but in reality she is actually exploring the coasts of Norway and doing battle with a series of Viking warriors. It would be tempting to give players a peek into the natural world during this journey, but Ninja Theory isn't interested

in what's happening in the "real world" during Senua's journey. Like most people who wrestle with psychosis, Senua's experiences feel real; therefore, they can be described as her reality. In *Hellblade*, players only see the world through Senua's eyes.

"We want to replicate the experience of psychosis," Antoniadis says. "If players find that unnerving, they will gain some kind of understanding of what it can be like for somebody experiencing these things in real life. That would be good...I think there will be some people who will be turned off, and won't want to live in this world, and in some ways I think that's okay. But if I can't stand it for a few hours, then what about the person that can't escape these experiences? At least you can understand how unrelenting that is."

Throughout its research, Ninja Theory learned that games have traditionally misrepresented mental illness. Mechanics like insanity meters, as seen in games such as *Eternal Darkness*, overly simplify the experience of many who wrestle with psychosis. And the trope of a mentally ill patient who is always on the verge breaking into a fit of violence is largely a fabrication.

Working with those who wrestled with the mental disorder, the team constructed a series of unique visual effects to convey the experience in *Hellblade*. In one sequence, the world begins to break apart and look like it's fitted together out of a million different puzzle pieces. In another sequence, the wind in the trees only seems to move whenever Senua does. These visual effects sometimes come out of nowhere and without warning. In a flash, all of the colors in the environment might become incredibly vivid, as though Senua's eyes can perceive new colors across the visual spectrum.

"Some of the things that people talked with us about were pretty dramatic," Antoniadis says. "Like one woman, she would have a recurring thing where she would walk into a room and she would see corpses hanging from the ceiling. Often, it would be so real that she would sometimes try to help them down. The experiences that some people have are not subtle. They can be brutal and horrific, but also beautiful. Sometimes they would describe the world's colors going kaleidoscopic."

We experience the power of the visual effect for ourselves; in one unnerving encounter, we pilot Senua through an environment that has gone completely black. This sequence represents psychotic blindness. The environment hasn't actually grown darker, Senua has just lost her sight. Players must help her navigate through the world using only her hyper active sense of hearing. Objects within the environment that make sound actually give off a small amount of light. In the distance, we can hear the rattling of chains and a monster's growl. The experience is incredibly unnerving, like something from a horror game, but Ninja Theory says horror isn't the ultimate goal.

"The game is not out to scare you," Antoniadis says. "The goal is not to frighten players all the way through. It's to put you in a frightening place. These are horrific episodes, but it's not all about that. But, I think there are parts of the game that should make you terrified."

Enemy Within

Ninja Theory sees *Hellblade* as a way to give players the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of someone struggling with psychosis. In fact, the team discovered that video game logic has more in common with psychosis than one might think. On a basic level, psychosis is a phenomenon where a person fails to correctly measure cause-and-effect, while games are largely an exploration of cause-and-effect. This means it's easy for game developers to encourage players to make psychosis-like leaps in logic. For example, when a player finds a key in a video game, it's not uncommon for them to think it might unlock the first locked door they encounter. In the real world, this kind of logic is absurd, but it is the kind of logical link a person with psychosis might make. Ninja Theory believes this insight into the minds of the mentally ill serves a greater good.

"If we take something that people don't want to touch with a barge pole, which is mental health issues, and actually treat it like a subject that needs to be researched, interpreted, and approached without judgment, and then people come out of the game understanding something new about the subject, then I think we've done a really good thing," Antoniadis says.





THE ENTIRE GAME – INCLUDING CUT SCENES – FEATURES ONE SINGLE CAMERA MOVEMENT, WHICH IS INTENDED TO HELP PLAYERS FEEL LIKE THEY ARE A PART OF SENUA'S JOURNEY

One of the ways Ninja Theory encourages players to explore the concepts of cause-and-effect in *Hellblade* is through a rune mechanic that Senua interacts with during her journey. Runes are symbols that sometimes appear on doors and other important objects in *Hellblade*. They act as barriers that prevent Senua from progressing deeper into the environment.

Like many people with psychosis, symbols hold a great deal of meaning to Senua. When she sees a door with engraved runes, she feels compelled to find those runic symbols hidden elsewhere within the environment before she can progress through that door. Ninja Theory talked with several mental-health-services users who described how otherwise meaningless objects could take on a great deal of importance to them. The runes in *Hellblade* are meant to represent the common psychosis of having to satisfy some otherwise trivial criteria that doesn't hold any real meaning.

After Senua encounters a rune, that symbol becomes burned into her memory. Whenever a player stops moving, that rune will slowly come into focus in the center of the screen. In order to satisfy her compulsion, Senua must find the right locations within the environment where various objects line up to recreate these runic designs. For example, during our playthrough we had to climb a ladder to a high perch in order to look across the horizon and line up a wooden post with several tree branches to create a zigzag pattern that looked like a runic symbol on a nearby door.

Runes are one way Ninja Theory is hoping to subvert players' perceptions, but the team is looking to iterate on this concept throughout the game. For example, during another sequence, Senua finds that her path forward has been interrupted by an impassable gap. Thankfully, there is one place within the environment where several objects line up,

creating the optical illusion of a bridge spanning the gap. If Senua focuses in on these objects for a second, the bridge actually materializes and Senua is able to use it to cross the gap. Unfortunately, the barriers standing in Senua's way won't always be passive symbols. Sometimes Senua must get her hands dirty and her sword bloody.

Twist Of The Blade

Hellblade may have started development as a spiritual sequel to *Heavenly Sword*, but the game has become something very different from what fans might expect from a *Heavenly Sword* successor. A prime example of this is Ninja Theory's new approach to combat, which is much more grounded and realistic than the team's previous efforts.

"I grew up playing arcade games, where you learn the controls as you play, and I like the idea

that you can pick up a game and learn as you play," Antoniades says. "I don't like the idea that a game has to be playable by everyone... The main driver of *Hellblade* is the story, and the combat is part of the action. This is probably a bit more like a film. *The Revenant* is not about the action, but it's got a lot of cool action in it. There's no combo list to memorize in *Hellblade*. You can just pick it up and discover it."

True to Ninja Theory's pedigree, *Hellblade*'s combat feels tight and intense – if a little pared down. Senua has a light and heavy attack, and her heavy attack can be charged to deliver a more powerful blow that staggers enemies. However, Senua won't perform fancy aerial juggles with her enemies. If she takes a couple of hits, Senua falls to the ground, and must scramble to regain her footing and clear her head before jumping back into the fray. Unfortunately, enemies rarely give Senua a



reprieve and won't hesitate to attack her from behind. Thankfully, the Furies in Senua's head will occasionally warn her if an enemy is flanking, giving her a split second to dodge.

The only unnatural trick at Senua's disposal is her ability to slow down time. During combat, Senua slowly build ups a focus meter. Once the meter is full, she can slow down the action, giving her a few precious seconds to move in on her opponents and finish them off. The team sees this focus ability as an extension of her altered perception of the world.

"The combat is part of the narrative, so it's meant to feel brutal and leave you vulnerable," Antoniades says. "Part of that is being knocked down to the ground while fighting. We don't want to set the bar so low that any casual person who just wants to experience the story can play it. You have to have a degree of competence in playing games to experience this. The difficulty should be part of the experience. This journey, without a degree of suffering, diminishes it."

Ninja Theory is confident that Hellblade's action is moving in the right direction, but the team also wants fans to know that it isn't an action-focused experience. Hellblade is primarily a narrative game that features a few scattered combat encounters. In fact, Ninja Theory says there are large sections of the game where players won't encounter combat for an hour or more.

Through The Fires Of Hell

Ninja Theory isn't aiming to deliver a happy, heartwarming tale. Because of its heavy subject matter, the studio believes not every piece of entertainment needs to leave its viewer happy and comfortable.

"It's definitely not fun," Antoniades says. "I hope that you come out of it saying, 'Wow, that was a great, worthwhile experience,' but if you come out of it going, 'Wow, that was a fun

game. Rad!' it'd be a weird thing. We're tackling issues of fear, death, and psychosis, and some of it can be terrifying. Some of it can be horrible. Some of it can be dark. But, it's not all dark. It is a journey."

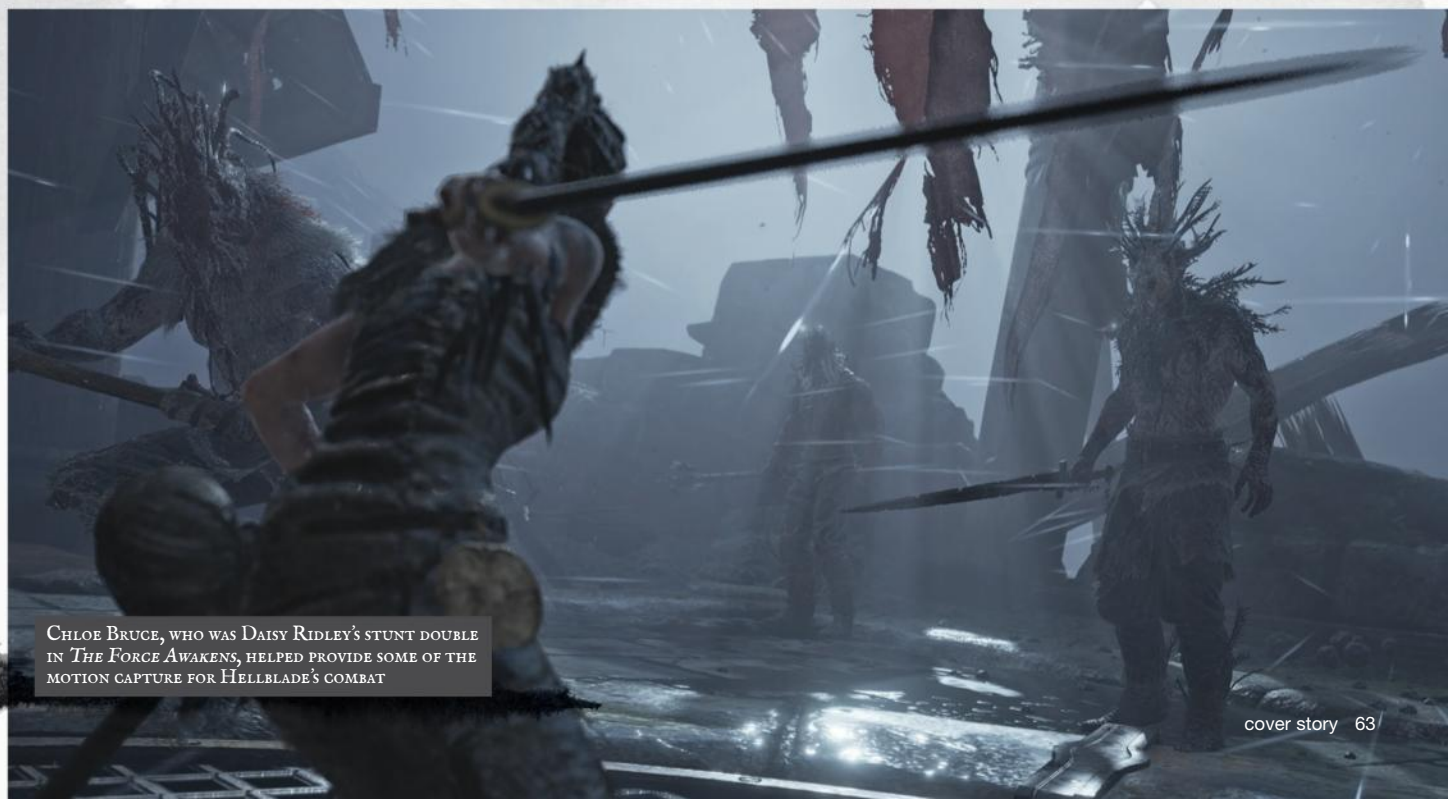
Like Senua's journey, game development isn't always fun, but Ninja Theory is proud of the mark it has made on the industry. After working on games like Heavenly Sword and DMC, the studio feels it has made a name for itself as a developer who cares about narrative-driven action games. Antoniades hopes it will continue to work on more licensed products and big-budget releases. At the same time, Hellblade is Ninja Theory's first foray into what he hopes is a new arena for game developers: a space within the industry that allows for the creative indie spirit without sacrificing the high-production values of a big studio.

"With Hellblade, we sometimes have to find the sideways route, and I think that means exploring a lot of dead ends," Antoniades says.

"We've explored a lot of dead ends, but we always find something interesting that feels fresh. We're not saying this is going to be the biggest game ever. That's not the intention. But, we want to try to make it memorable and interesting. If it's not interesting and memorable, it has been a waste of time."

Antoniades won't know if Hellblade can sell the 200,000 to 300,000 copies it needs to be considered a success until Ninja Theory launches the game later this year. Until then, Ninja Theory remains hunkered down, creatively cutting corners while trying not to compromise its creative vision. If nothing else, Antoniades shouldn't worry about wasting his time, because Hellblade's journey through a broken mind looks like it will be nothing if not memorable. ♦

For a closer look at Senua's story, a look at new gameplay footage, and an exploration of Ninja Theory's motion capture space, check out our online cover hub: gameinformer.com/hellblade



CHLOE BRUCE, WHO WAS DAISY RIDLEY'S STUNT DOUBLE IN *THE FORCE AWAKENS*, HELPED PROVIDE SOME OF THE MOTION CAPTURE FOR HELLBLADE'S COMBAT



Middle-earth: Shadow Of War

Monolith doubles down on the nemesis system

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
Monolith Productions

» **Release**
August 22

Though the mainstream love affair with Peter Jackson's excellent *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy had largely died down by 2014, Monolith's *Shadow of Mordor* proved creators have a lot left to mine in that rendition of the Tolkien universe. The game's signature nemesis system started an innovative new chapter in narrative design, promoting the procedurally generated Uruks who slay hero Talion to chieftain status, pitting them as formidable rivals begging to be vanquished on later quests. Monolith's plans for emergent storytelling are bigger and bolder in *Shadow of War*.

Players resume the role of Talion, a ranger whose fate is inextricably tied to that of the wraith Celebrimbor, the smith who helped forge the Rings of Power. When we last left them, the duo destroyed the Black Hand and temporarily beat back Sauron. As we rejoin their story, Mordor's forces continue to grow more formidable, and one of the Dark Lord's legions is laying siege to the Gondoran stronghold of Minas Ithil. This easternmost fortification of Gondor eventually falls, and is renamed Minas Morgul.

Beating back Sauron's army and jockeying for control of fortresses in and around Mordor is Talion's primary objective in *Shadow of War*. To do so, you must raise your own orc army to take down the unique war chiefs governing these lands. As with the nemesis system, certain members of your group have unique personalities and storylines. "It's a really interesting line to ride because the main reason you are behind enemy lines in Mordor is to defeat the orcs and defeat Sauron's army, but at the same time you are using these guys as your followers and recruiting them and forcing them into that situation as well," says Monolith creative VP Michael de Plater. "You are kind of turning them against each other, kind of like the battle of Cirith Ungol where Sam and Frodo got in there and were able to manipulate the orcs to destroy themselves."

We saw this new dynamic play out during a live demo set several hours into the game's story. Talion's army has gathered in front of the fortress of Seregost, which is currently held by a giant orc named Ur-Hakon the Dragon. To even the odds against this

legion, Talion enlists the help of two special followers with unique personalities. Ragdud the Iron Mount is a marauder beast mount who can cut quickly through infantry, and Az-Laar the Demolisher is a mountain of an orc who excels at breaching enemy walls. The battle has a little extra bad blood considering one of Hakon's allies is Thur Storm-Bringer, who used to be among Talion's ranks. After being left for dead he switched sides, and now he wants blood. Before the fight starts he yells "Come charge into the flames of your reckoning!"

The battle rages with the series' signature timing-based combat. The Demolisher crashes right through a door and starts ripping heads off orcs as Talion drops from above and starts thinning the herd. A spy within Hakon's ranks has placed explosives throughout the area, which allows Talion to trigger another breach point. At the second set of gates, an enemy named Tugog the Flame of War drops oil onto our giant orc and burns him alive. In retribution, Talion dominates a nearby drake, one of the new mounts in *Shadow of War*, and takes to the skies,



unleashing the creature's flame on any enemies nearby. After turning Tugog to his side, Talion enters the boss chambers to face Hakon.

The fight that ensues proves too much for Talion. Just when it looks like he's done for, Ragdug rides in from out of nowhere to make a saving blow on the hulking orc. He loses his mount, but the diversion gives Talion enough time to gather himself for one final assault. With Hakon defeated, Seregost is now in the ranger's control.

After Talion takes a fortress, he must decide which orc he hands the region to. Given his heroics on the battlefield, Ragdug is the smart choice here. One complaint Monolith heard about *Shadow of Mordor*'s nemesis system was players wanted more insight into the orcish culture. After you got to know several different characters, questions naturally arose about their society. *Shadow of War* delves much deeper, introducing the various tribes throughout Mordor. Depending on who controls a fortress, the surrounding region will reflect his tribal background. Feral tribe territories feature more creatures and hunting missions,

while mauraders will loot and pillage more coin from the region. Mystical tribes may have more ritual sites, and industry-focused tribes will dig more mines and traffic more slaves.

Capturing these towers rewards Talion with experience, loot, and resources in the battle against Sauron. The best gear from this haul is a unique piece of epic armor he lifted from Storm-Bringer. "We've tried to relate our gear system and hunting for better and better loot to the nemesis system," De Plater says. "The strength and the type of enemy you defeat and how you take them down will determine whether he can drop epic or legendary gear, and then each time you get that gear you get challenges to then unlock its full potential." Talion can also use the fortress to train his followers and upgrade its defenses against counter-attack.

Seregost is just one of many fortresses Talion must conquer throughout Mordor and its border territories. Monolith contends *Shadow of War*'s open world is much larger than its predecessor. "Every region itself is significantly larger, and we have more of them," de Plater says. "And we have

a far greater diversity of environments. Having a human city is really quite fun and opens up a lot of possibilities for us." We only got a brief glimpse of the map, so we can't speak to the diversity of side missions available this time around, but de Plater said one of the team's core focuses was to tell more stories with the side content. Expect to run into more familiar faces from the *Lord of the Rings* universe as well.

Shadow of Mordor was a fun game, but to me it ultimately felt like a proof of concept for a much grander experience. The combat was engaging and the nemesis system had loads of potential, but the open world and its various side missions left a lot of room for expansion and improvement, and I felt the stories the game told were ultimately shallow. *Shadow of War* looks to be growing in a promising direction, intent on fulfilling its predecessor's promise. We're excited about the possibilities Monolith is creating for dynamic storytelling by introducing more distinct characters on both sides of the battle, and fleshing out the open world with more diversity could take this series to the next level. » **Matt Bertz**

Injustice 2

NetherRealm's comic fighter goes bigger and darker

» **Platform**

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**

1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**

Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**

NetherRealm Studios

» **Release**

May 16

NetherRealm remains one of the few fighting game studios still creating quality single-player campaigns. We finally got a taste of what the developer is bringing to the table with Injustice 2's story mode.

The demo consisted of the first chapter of the single-player campaign. It opens with Bruce Wayne telling what appears to be a council or jurors about the fall of Superman. The brief scene does an efficient job of catching you up if you haven't played the first game (spoiler alert), explaining that The Joker tricked Superman into killing Lois Lane and then, after killing the Joker in revenge, he became

a homicidal dictator. From there, the game flashes back to Batman and Damian Wayne, Bruce's biological son as well as the current Robin, speeding toward Arkham in the Batplane to stop Superman from doing...something.

The opening act is just as dark as the original game, with betrayals, heartbreaks, and ideological clashes between fan-favorite heroes. I'm curious to see how the second game incorporates characters from the main timeline (if at all) and if we'll see multiple versions of our heroes fighting side-by-side or even against themselves. I also want to see how Supergirl, who's been prominently featured in Injustice

2's advertising, figures into the storyline. I didn't see her at all during this story demo. Is she our heroine? The catalyst for evil Superman's release after his capture at the end of the first game? Injustice 2, even more than the first game, has a sizable character roster, with each character almost certainly playing some role in the main storyline. Seeing how NetherRealm incorporates them all into a single story is always fun.

Fighting with A.I. opponents remains much the same as it did in the first Injustice – brutal and efficient, with emphasis placed on building up a meter so you can perform special



Dr. Fate joins the fray as a levitating tank capable of teleporting around the arena and laying the smackdown on foes



attacks. The opponents I faced as Batman were pretty easy to take down with a series of gliding kicks, batarangs, and a new kryptonite punch move. Batman's special, which involves the Batplane juggling enemies with a mini-gun and missiles, is also enjoyable to behold.

I also tried Doctor Fate, a new Injustice character who's been in the DCU since 1940. Fate is a spellcaster who levitates in battle and throws enemies about with telekinesis; he also has a move that buffs his defenses. He teleports around the battlefield and is unwieldy at first, but once you know where he moves when teleporting, he can be a powerful, unpredictable tank of a character.

Other characters have been revealed since our demo, with NetherRealm trickling out details. Though we didn't get hands-on time with Firestorm, Black Canary, Swamp Thing, Blue Beetle, and Darkseid (as a preorder bonus), these characters seem like promising additions to the game.

All characters come with their own special movesets and character-unique armors and weapons that can be earned through loot boxes. Some



of the armor I saw included classic costumes, like Batman's hulking armor from *The Dark Knight Returns*, while others were created specifically for the game. A lot of these special armors have stats bonuses tied to them that affect your power or speed, so they are more than just cosmetic. While loot boxes are purchased with in-game currency, NetherRealm says there are no microtransactions tied to the loot box system, though it did not comment on whether or not the game would have any microtransactions at all.

Injustice 2 looks to continue its predecessor's peanut butter and chocolate combination of a detailed combat system along with a story that pits our favorite heroes and villains against one another. NetherRealm is particularly skilled at balancing dark subject matter with goofy humor in its story modes, so we're excited to see how the plot of this sequel pans out and how long the loot-based armor system can keep both hardcore and casual players coming back to the game after they're done with the campaign. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Fan favorite Blue Beetle is one of the new characters answering the call



Guardians Of The Galaxy

Telltale changes up its familiar style

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
iOS • Android

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Telltale Games

» **Developer**
Telltale Games

» **Release**
April 18

Telltale Games continues to broaden its catalog of major league franchise partners. After tackling *The Walking Dead*, *Batman*, and *Game of Thrones*, the leader in narrative adventure development is turning its eye toward the Marvel stable with the loveable space pirates that make up the *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Telltale discussed some of the first details of the partnership at the recent PAX East, and revealed that the new game is a departure in several important ways from its previous projects.

At first glance, the most obvious shift is its visual style. Telltale fans are used to the company's trademark exaggerated aesthetic, but the sci-fi vibe of *Guardians*, along with the clear allusion to the cinematic version of these

characters, results in a slick art presentation that punches up the realism on the characters' faces (excepting the fact that at least one of the leads looks like a raccoon).

Telltale draws inspiration from the original comics, the cartoon iteration, and the movie version for its take, but it won't link to those universes directly. As such, the big-name film actors aren't along for the ride, but Telltale has brought on a veteran team of voice actors for all the leads, including Nolan North (*Uncharted*, *Destiny*) and Adam Harrington, who played Bigby Wolf in Telltale's *The Wolf Among Us*.

Gameplay is likely to shake up expectations. Narrative remains Telltale's focus, but the team promises big environments and a hefty dose of action scenes intermixed with the conversation. Peter Quill (aka Starlord) takes center stage, and his jet boots allow him to fly around very large environments in a way that most previous Telltale characters haven't. *Guardians* also includes some variation of Peter's scanning technology (seen most memorably in the opening scene of the first *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie) for investigations.

While stopping short of talking directly about playable characters in the later episodes, Marvel and Telltale say the planned five-episode structure echoes the five core members of the

team. Whether Peter remains the primary playable hero throughout the later episodes remains to be seen.

As you might expect, we're unlikely to see major characters like Groot or Drax on the chopping block in the same way we've come to expect in some other Telltale adventures; *Guardians* just isn't that kind of story. Instead, narrative drama plays out thanks to the interpersonal conflict between the main characters. Your decisions might affect whether Gamora or Rocket joins you on a mission, for instance. The broader story is all about the familial bonds between these heroes, all of whom used to be alone, but have found a connection through one another. Expect lots of Marvel Easter eggs as well, whether they sit in the background aboard the *Guardians'* ship, *the Milano*, or in the vast interspecies hub city of Knowhere – an urban sprawl dug out of the interior of an ancient and massive robotic head.

Telltale is releasing its premiere episode around the same time as the next movie in this franchise, which should drum up some attention. It's a good bet that Telltale's *Guardians of the Galaxy* is a test case for whether we'll see other Marvel properties from the company in the coming years. In the meantime, I'm just crossing my fingers for a cameo from Cosmo, the telepathic Russian cosmonaut dog. » **Matt Miller**





Perception

Hide-and-seek horror in the dark

Survival horror often restricts you in one way or another. Sometimes, your only tool against enemies is your ability to run, or your weapon ammunition is limited. In *Perception*, a game from ex-BioShock and Dead Space developers, you play as a character with an even greater limitation: she can't see. While this may sound like a strange approach, it makes for a terrifying experience worth keeping on your radar.

You play as a blind girl named Cassie, who enters an ominous mansion that has been haunting her dreams. As she seeks to unravel the mystery of the home, a ghostly presence follows

her every step. Because she is blind, Cassie uses echolocation to navigate. By tapping her cane on the ground, you momentarily see the world around you in crude outlines. You can never see clearly, which adds frightening atmospheric tension. The more echolocation is used, however, the more it attracts the ghost hunting you. It soon becomes a game of using echolocation sparingly, without attracting too much attention. If you do start being hunted, you must quickly find a place to hide, be it under a bed or in a closet.

I played a short demo of *Perception* at GDC and came away impressed. Making my way through the house, I

heard creaks and faraway shrieks that made my skin crawl. You are subtly guided through the home when doors glow a bright green, indicating that's the way to proceed.

From one room to the next, you can interact with objects and audio recordings to learn more about the home and its ghostly inhabitants. It feels similar to *Gone Home*, where you explore the house and rummage through a family's belongings to push the narrative forward. I also encountered short puzzles, such as figuring out a combination to a locked drawer.

Cassie often reacts to strange happenings, such as furniture warping and sudden sounds like a door slamming shut, which adds to your disorientation.

Because of the supernatural element to *Perception*, there is also a psychological twist to the gameplay. Ghoulish figures pop in and out of view, and you second-guess yourself, wondering what's really there and what isn't. For example, I saw a woman vomiting in a toilet, but she was actually a ghost.

Perception not only plays with your senses, but it also messes with your head. It was one of my most memorable experiences at GDC this year, and I can't wait to return to this spooky home when the game launches later this year. » **Elise Favis**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
The Deep End Games

» **Developer**
The Deep End Games

» **Release**
2017





Mario Kart 8 Deluxe

Additional enhancements to a great game

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1 to 8-Player Racing
(12-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
April 28

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe comes with everything that made the Wii U title an excellent addition to the franchise and more. The port includes all the DLC from Mario Kart 8 and adds some fresh characters, new battle modes, and small-but-significant gameplay tweaks.

New characters joining the crew include King Boo, Dry Bones, Bowser Jr., and boy/girl Inklings from Splatoon. This may not seem like a deluge of additions, but there are so many characters to pick from now that the inclusion of these additional choices feels significant. Tooling around with King Boo and Dry Bones is a ton of fun, and losing to one of those annoying little

Inklings invokes the perfect amount of snark.

Deluxe has a wide variety of battle modes including the all-new Renegade Roundup. In this mode, teams take on the roles of hunter and hunted, with the authorities sporting piranha plants from their vehicles that automatically grab and jail any renegade that gets too close to their vehicles. Renegades in jail can't do much except call for their friends to help; other renegades can unlock the jail cells by driving over special key locations on the map.

These mechanics make for interesting side-game strategies, as often the jailers need to decide if they should head out to the map outskirts

to round up remaining renegades or camp around the cages to ensure that the captives don't get set free. If the renegades have even one roamer outside of jail when the clock stops, they win. Players can also enjoy standard balloon-popping battles, Shine Thief (where the one with the shine has to try to hold on to it as long as possible!), Bob-omb Blast, and Coin Runners.

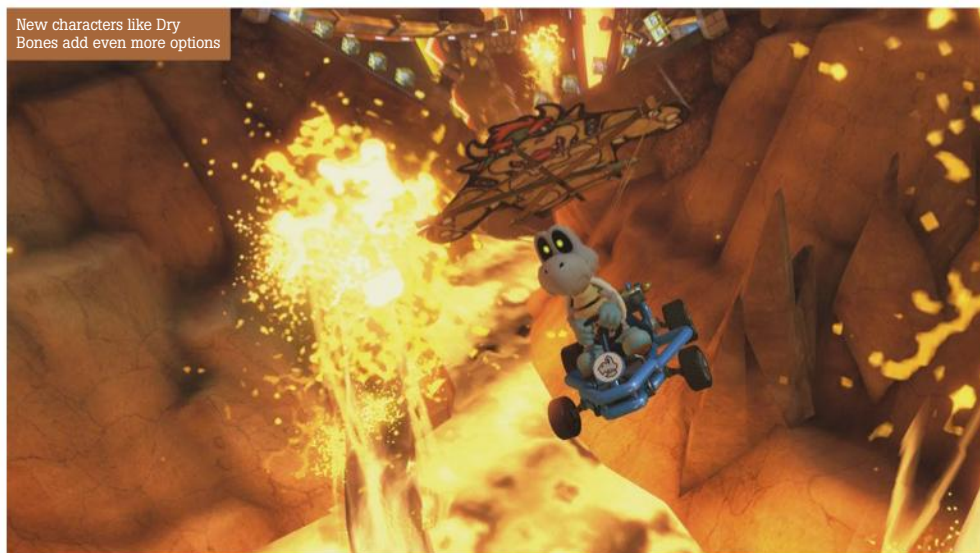
On the item front, Deluxe allows players to hold two, making racing ever-so-slightly more strategy focused and less fire-and-forget to try and grab a more desirable object. The high-flying jump-boosting feather item, which hasn't been a thing since Super Mario Kart on the SNES, is back in Deluxe and exclusive to battle mode. The Boo item also makes a return, allowing players to snag valuable loot from enemies and go invisible.

Playing around with the multiple methods of control available on the Switch, I gravitated toward the pro controller over the other options, but none of them felt uncomfortable or unwieldy. There's even a little steering-wheel accessory you can snap your Joy-Con into if you're feeling particularly jazzed about 8's second shot at greatness on the Switch.

The changes and additional modes may appear minor, but they do a lot toward making Deluxe a superior title to its first incarnation. While Mario Kart 8 is great, it was lacking in the battle department, something that Deluxe aims to fix with plenty of different options for karting around with friends.

» **Daniel Tack**

New characters like Dry Bones add even more options



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Sonic Forces

Sonic Team lifts the curtain on the next mainline entry

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Sonic Team

» **Release**
Winter

Last summer, Sega revealed *Sonic Mania*, a retro-style game from a collection of indie developers being overseen by Sonic Team head Takashi Iizuka. Hours later, Iizuka teased a new game from the core Sonic Team developers under the working title *Project Sonic 2017*. After months of nothing more than a teaser trailer to speculate on, Sega has finally unveiled both the name and the first look at gameplay.

As indicated in the teaser trailer, *Sonic Forces* gives players control of both Modern and Classic Sonic, as well as a third play-style that Sonic

Team isn't quite ready to reveal yet, in one big, intertwining story. The gameplay I saw was of Modern Sonic. As with *Sonic Generations*, the Modern Sonic sequences play out in furiously fast-paced 3D. The gameplay draws heavy inspiration from both *Generations* and *Sonic Colors*, two of the more well-liked games the franchise has recently produced.

I checked out a full playthrough of *City Stage*, a level set in a European-style villa. As Sonic starts his run, destructive meteors rain down, smashing into buildings. As the hedgehog speeds around a corner, the street he's running along opens up to reveal a pair of massive egg-shaped robots approaching the city via the river.

In *Sonic Forces*, Eggman has already won. He has conquered the world, and the effects of that can be seen throughout the game's various stages. Sega isn't yet unveiling just how this happened, but we expect to learn more in the lead-up to release.

A group of three smaller robots appear in the path and Sonic wastes no time boosting through the trio, sending the bots flying. A line of airborne machines appear before him, and just as we've seen in nearly every game since *Sonic Adventure*, he uses his homing attack to bounce from

enemy to enemy and reach a higher platform. As the Blue Blur continues through the stage, I spot more familiar Sonic elements like grind rails, boosters, and ziplines.

After a bit more running and jumping, the camera shifts to the side to provide more of a side-scrolling feel for a chunk of the stage. Just as this perspective shift did in recent games, these 2D sequences provide a definite retro feel, but they are completely separate from the still-unseen Classic Sonic stages.

During gameplay, several secondary characters like Knuckles, Amy, and members of the Chaotix team communicate with Sonic via radio as if to report on the action they're seeing during the assault. Sega says that while these characters are part of the story, they are not playable.

It's no secret the franchise has had some rough years in the past, and there are still many questions surrounding *Sonic Forces*. How will the Classic Sonic sequences play? What does the mysterious third play-style entail? Can Sonic Team improve upon the middling level design of recent games? While I only saw a small slice of gameplay from one part of *Sonic Forces*, the first answers it provides are promising. » **Brian Shea**



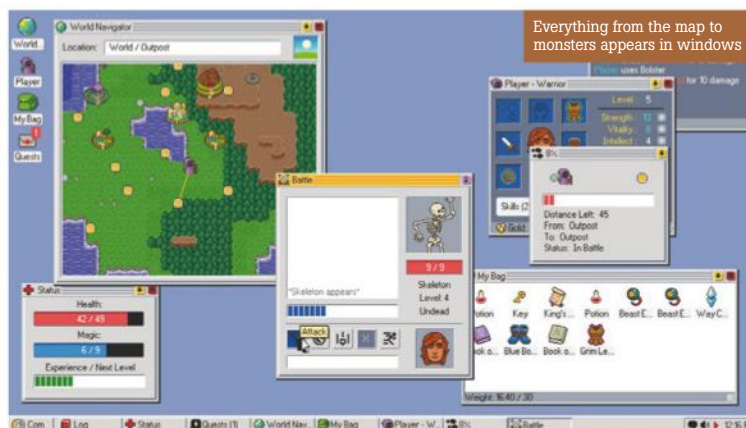
Kingsway

Fighting with your operating system

Adult Swim Games is rapidly ramping up its catalog of titles, a far cry from the web-based minigames it was known for years ago. Kingsway is a clever take on the old-school role-playing game, with an ancient user interface and loads and loads of clickable, closable, movable windows. While you may be battling slimes, skeletons, and jellyfish as you explore towns, dungeons, and seas, the real opponent is actually the operating system and the windows it contains. While Kingsway is as lightweight as it gets on graphics and sound, the concept of tackling a classic RPG in a decidedly bizarre way is charming and compelling.

Gameplay begins with selecting a class and running through a quick tutorial. You acquire weapons and armor, slot them on your paper doll, distribute attribute points, and select skills. Sounds pretty standard, right? However, by the time you get to your first village, you've probably started to grasp that the real gameplay revolves around managing the windows and clutter that's starting to take up valuable screen real estate. In fact, the monster windows move around as well, floating through other windows, jerking around, altering their speed traveling across the screen, and more. You may have a great sword and a magic tunic, but can you maneuver your mouse cursor to click on the attack button? Can you dodge an arrow "flying" across the screen in its own little window by clicking the avoid button it time?

These mechanics make it much



harder to locate and click the attack button on the monster pane. In a playful fashion, monster windows "behave" much like the monster associated with them – a zombie may lumber very slowly or be completely stationary, a snake may slither up and down, and a jellyfish may bob as if it's moving in the water. And this bestiary was only the beginning of the game; I can only imagine that things ramp up substantially in terms of monster mechanics as the player moves deeper into dungeons.

Traveling from point to point is as easy as clicking a button, and you discover all kinds of areas to explore, such as abandoned outposts, cities to buy, sell, and trade at, and deep dungeons filled with danger and treasure. Much of the game is randomly generated each time you play, and death is permanent. When you do finally lose your ace

hero after a long run, however, don't despair – there's a progression system of sorts going on behind the scenes, so every run will net you some currency to spend on account-wide upgrades that make your next run just a bit easier.

While the game is "beatable," it will likely take a savvy player plenty of runs and a number of hero deaths before victory is in sight, as the ominous windows threaten to overtake you. Managing combat while trying to sort through your item bag, allocate skill points, handle quests, and respond to the vast array of other tasks on your "desktop" can quickly spiral out of control.

Kingsway boots up this summer, and I can't wait to die buried under a sea of annoying windows. While it's too early to make any real judgments, I have a feeling that this one isn't headed to the recycle bin. » **Daniel Tack**

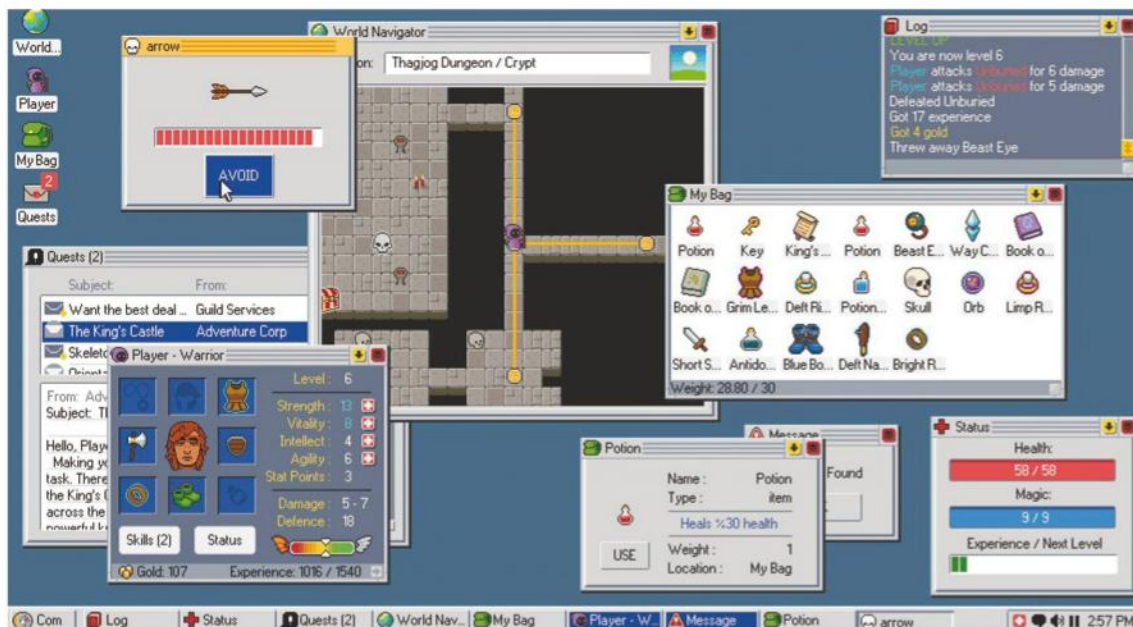
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Adult Swim Games

» **Developer**
Andrew Morrish

» **Release**
Summer



Hob

A mysterious world with a mechanical heart



» **Platform**
PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Runic Games

» **Developer**
Runic Games

» **Release**
2017

The world of Hob is shrouded in mystery. Remnants of a mechanical world pierce through lush nature, showing a fallen, forgotten world of technological marvels. The hooded protagonist you control through this Zelda-inspired adventure is nameless, genderless, and has no idea where it came from or what it is. All the hero knows is it's in a world at odds with itself.

As I make my way through Hob's strikingly beautiful landscapes, I encounter a few goblin-like enemies. The combat feels similar to top-down Zelda games with borrowed elements

from the Dark Souls series. While the encounters aren't as challenging as those found in the Souls series, I approach each adversary with caution, raising my shield to let them make the first move before roll-dodging and slashing at their backs.

The next enemy I face summons minions, which surround me. I need to take out the main monster to prevent more creatures from popping in, but first I create some room by dealing with the four smaller enemies. I jump and use my character's teleportation ability to stun nearby creatures, using the heavy attack to wipe them all out with an area-of-effect ground slam. I then turn my attention to the summoning monster.

While exploration of this open world is a major part of the game, progressing through the story requires the hero to delve into mechanical dungeons spread throughout the world. First, I must solve a puzzle to unlock the door. In this section, I rotate pillars to activate platforms, which I jump across with required precision to enable power switches. I finally throw enough switches to access an elevator that descends into the dungeon.

Once inside, light puzzle elements remain, but much of the action is timing-based platforming and searching for a glowing artifact. While the

adversarial robotic constructs from other parts of the game are present, I don't fight any of them in this location. In other dungeons combat takes center stage, but in this section the focus is on powering up platforms that allow me to progress through the dungeon.

As I make my way through the area, I see the objective off in the distance. Pressing a power switch to activate the mechanical components shows the sheer scale of the stage, emphasizing how relatively tiny the main protagonist is. After going through a series of platforms and puzzles, I reach the artifact. The hero brings it outside of the dungeon and plugs into a pedestal to power up another part of the world, opening a new path to progress through the adventure.

Featuring a wordless narrative, a minimalist soundtrack, and streamlined design that doesn't overload the senses, Hob stands in stark contrast to Runic Games' previous work on the Torchlight series. The combat and platforming feels tight, and the puzzles are just tricky enough to challenge you without giving you a feeling of hopelessness. While Hob doesn't currently have a set release date, the team tells me the game is definitely releasing in 2017. After spending a couple of hours with it, that date can't come soon enough. » **Brian Shea**



Nature has taken back many of the mechanical areas of Hob's world to the point that some plant life is dangerous to approach

Tacoma

Snooping in space

Fullbright's sci-fi follow-up to *Gone Home* is quietly making its way toward release, and I recently got hands-on with *Tacoma* to see how it's shaping up. The strong sci-fi foundation that we observed during our cover story and various demos over the past year is still here, and getting to walk around *Tacoma* instead of being led around was its own kind of treat.

I played through the game's opening, as engineer Amy Ferrier boards the station to collect data and figure out why the crew went missing. The introduction is quiet but impressive, allowing me to zoom down through a tube at the bottom of the station and access a door using American Sign Language.

While waiting for the airlock to open, I float around in zero gravity and try to throw a basketball through a hoop, with little success. When I get inside the station proper, I wander around the recreational spaces, offices, and living quarters. I find a pool table and pick up each of the balls, tossing them into the holes at the table, and then watch as they collect at the bottom of the table. I pick through the crew's belongings and throw books at windows because I'm a jerk.

Though the crew is missing, recordings of them are littered around the station that you can access via ODIN, the station's computer. These aren't just the bog-standard collectible item

recordings that deliver narrative bread crumbs, but instead they are an interactive mechanic necessary to completing the game. A visual representation of the crew members is available during these sessions, and are often essential to progression. For example, one recording has the station manager on the phone discussing her personal life and the struggles of managing the collection of personalities aboard the station. The recording shows the manager walk to a door, input a number code to unlock it, and then walk through. You must rewind the recording and watch it slowly to get the combination to unlock the door for yourself.

I particularly enjoyed exploring several areas of the station during a recording that included the whole crew, rewinding the tape so I could listen to a conversation in one room and then move to another to hear a different conversation that happened at the same time. The crew members are interesting people. They flirt. They chastise each other. They feel convincing. I can't wait to figure out more about their lives and what happened to them.

Tacoma still doesn't have a release date, though Fullbright says the game's in the home stretch now. I look forward to getting my hands on this sci-fi adventure and plumbing the depths of this station to unravel its mysteries.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Fullbright

» **Developer**
Fullbright

» **Release**
2017



Tacoma has you exploring a space station to unravel what happened in the aftermath of a mysterious, seemingly devastating event



Into The Breach

Turbo boosting in a new direction

» **Platform**
PC
» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
» **Publisher**
Subset Games
» **Developer**
Subset Games
» **Release**
2018

Subset Games' highly acclaimed starship roguelike FTL launched nearly five years ago to critical acclaim. The developer has quietly tinkered away on its new project ever since, not saying a word about its premise or genre – until now. Into The Breach is a tactical strategy game reminiscent of Fire Emblem and Advance Wars where players control a number of mechanized suits on a tiled battlefield to try and protect cities in a sci-fi future.

Unlike most games in a similar vein, the goal here is not to beat your enemies to death, but instead to use your abilities to fend off monsters for a certain number of turns. Justin Ma, one of the two lead designers on the project, says that Subset Games was inspired by films like *Batman V Superman* and *Pacific Rim*, where entire cityscapes are destroyed during massive battles.

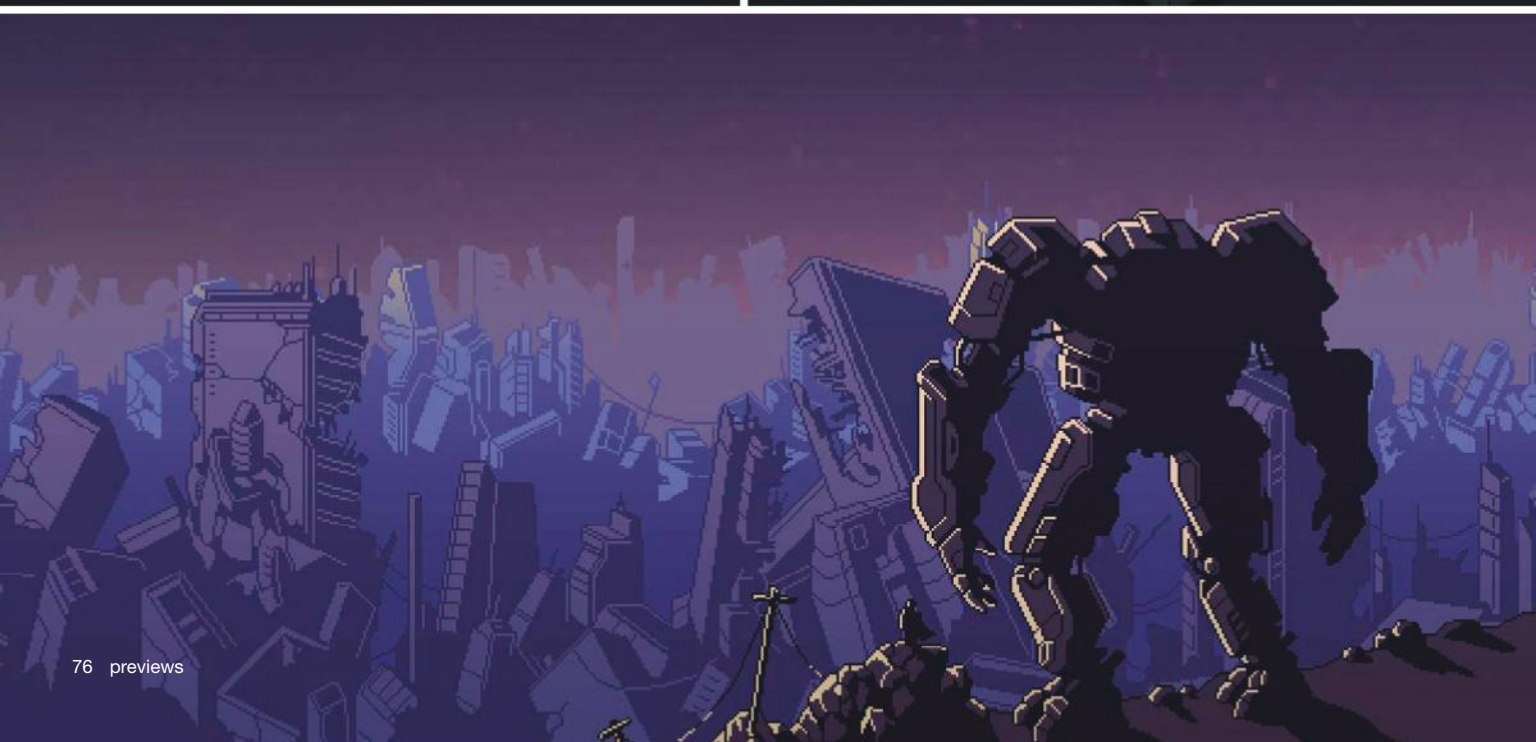
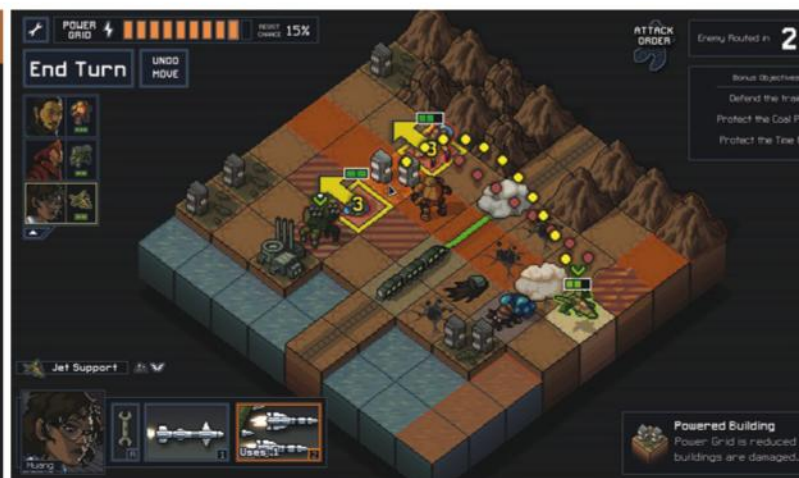
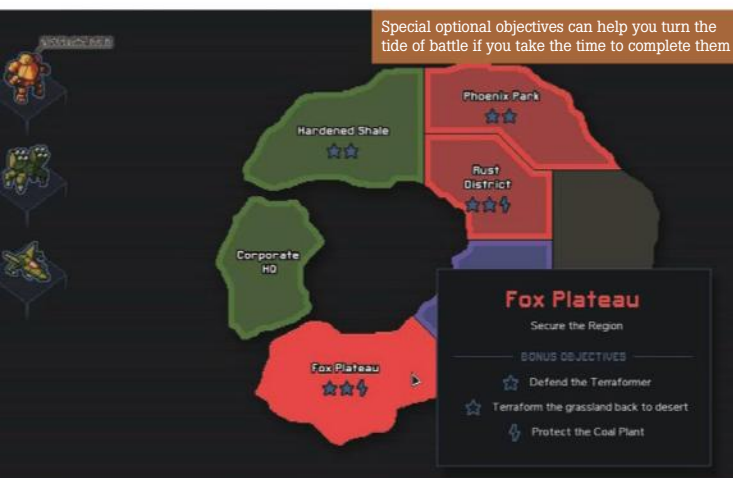
The studio wanted to make a game that focused on minimizing damage to city populations and saving lives.

A single battle in Into The Breach is short, lasting roughly five turns. Monsters emerge and start attacking cities. However, you can see what they are going to do a turn before they do it, so your job is figure out which combination of abilities and moves will best prevent them from destroying buildings. For example, one of your units can punch an enemy to slide them back a tile. Interestingly, the enemy will still perform its attack after your punch, so if its new target is a tile where another enemy is, it will attack that foe and deal damage to it. Optional goals are included on each map. During one of the levels in our demo, Ma brought down a dam, which proceeded to flood the middle of the map, killing the three

enemies that were in the water's path.

Ma says the clearest analog to Into The Breach is chess puzzles, where the player is presented with a board with prearranged pieces and they have a number of turns to checkmate an opponent. During my demo that reference stuck; Into The Breach seems like a game that's easy to play and understand but difficult to master, with loads of move combinations and tactical depth available to the player.

Into The Breach is still quite a bit away from release. "We have the foundation, but now we need to generate a ton of content," Ma says. This might be disappointing for FTL and strategy fans to hear, but if Into The Breach can continue to channel the inventiveness I saw in my demo throughout the entire game, it should be more than worth the wait. » **Javy Gwaltney**



Quake Champions

The old meets the new



Quake Champions captures that old feeling of FPS satisfaction: connecting on your 56k modem, grabbing a nailgun and quad damage, and mowing through a field of opponents at lightning speeds. It's fast, frantic, and conjures up notions of nostalgia of both old-school Quake and Unreal Tournament. Despite adding modern touches like hero-based abilities, the moment-to-moment action is twitchy, precise, and rooted in the core concepts that defined the era of arena shooters.

"The arena shooter is kind of reemerging, people are tired of realistic military shooters," says creative director Tim Willits. "For people that are new to Quake, I believe the addition of

champions will help them, and we want to push people to team games. You can focus on one champion you like."

At PAX East 2017, I played a round with the champion Nyx. Before playing, I was admittedly skeptical that Quake Champions could live up to the old-school speed and style. With a vast array of hero shooters already available or coming to market, my hopes weren't high. After just a few minutes, the experience was surprisingly refreshing and allayed my concerns. While heroes and "ultimate abilities" are present, they're downplayed in comparison to the focus on relentless action, fighting over power-ups and weapon spawns, and getting the drop on opponents with your choice of weapons.

Nyx's special ability, Ghost Walk, became an important part of my strategy, but wasn't something I had to think about all the time. When active, it's a fun skill test that can position you for a glorious multi-kill if executed correctly, allowing you to become invulnerable and invisible for a short time. If you "spawn" out of Ghost Walk on a player, they're instantly killed. It's a great way to sneak into an encounter and take out one player, and then position yourself to have the edge on other unsuspecting opponents even after your first target is toast.

Outside of Team Deathmatch, modes like Sacrifice and Duel allow players to tackle more objective-based fare or high-profile small-scale battles. Quake Champions opts to tackle the free-to-play conundrum in an interesting way. Players can play completely free and unlock champions by acquiring in-game currency, or purchase Quake Champions for a set price and have all the champions unlocked.

Players can earn and unlock loot crates that contain cosmetics to further customize and deck out their characters. So can we expect to see Quake Champions on consoles?

"Not now. I mean there are some things you can't do with controllers," Willits says. "Our core base for Quake is PC. We'll definitely explore it down the road, but we will need to make some changes, and we haven't quite figured that out yet." » **Daniel Tack**

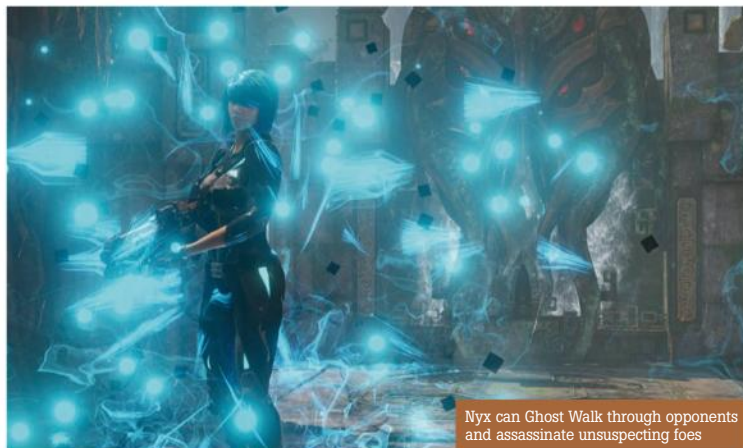
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
10-Player Online
Shooter

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
id Software

» **Release**
2017



Nyx can Ghost Walk through opponents and assassinate unsuspecting foes



Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War III

Old time rock and roll

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Relic Entertainment

» **Release**
April 27

The prestigious Warhammer 40,000 license has been adapted into nearly every video game genre imaginable. Role-playing game. Both first-person and third-person shooter. MOBA. Turn-based strategy. Relic's Dawn of War series might be the most popular one, and for good reason. The first two games are stellar real-time strategy titles that took advantage of this goofy, rich universe, where space marines and orks throw themselves against each other with chainsaw swords, and where the battlefield oozes red with copious amounts of blood. Dawn of War III looks to continue the legacy of the series by remaining true to pillars of the franchise.

I recently played a multiplayer match as the Eldar, a powerful race armed with psychic abilities. Dawn of War III plays like an RTS title you could have played over a decade ago. This is not, contrary to what you might expect, a bad thing. Moments into the match, despite not having played an RTS in years, I was building necessary structures, producing troops, collecting resources, and upgrading equipment as my opponent did the same. The goal of this match was to destroy the other player's core, which requires taking out the generators surrounding it.

The Eldar are fun to play with, especially if you've had your fill of the sort of hulking heavy hitters like the orks

or the space marines. The Eldar are quick and fragile, but deal devastating damage in numbers and have special abilities that can dominate the battlefield if you know how to use them. As the match progressed and I collected more resources, I unlocked the ability to call in special heroes. The two we saw were quite different. Jain Zar is a spear-wielding character who wreaks havoc on anyone unfortunate enough to be in his range. The colossal Wraith Knight is capable of stomping multiple units into oblivion. You can also spawn rifts that let you teleport to your other structures on the map. This gives you the ability to set up ambushes when your opponent tries to go on the offensive, sending units to take on your base.

Dawn of War III's strategic gameplay offers a lot of depth. This is not a game of lightning-quick matches. My multiplayer match took me over an hour because my opponent and I kept trying out various strategies, pushing against each other's boundaries to see our respective weaknesses. I was never bored and felt an immense sensation of power by building up a huge army of physic ninjas and snipers to break through my foe's defenses, levelling their base building by building in classic RTS domination fashion.

Relic is clearly taking a "if it's not broken, don't fix it" mentality to Dawn of War III, and it's working. The bedrock of the series is as strong as ever, with tactical gameplay that forces you to the brink of mental exhaustion in your march toward victory. » **Javy Gwaltney**



Observer

Psychological horror seeps into the future

After the surprise success of last year's *Layers of Fear*, Bloober Team is returning to the horror exploration subgenre once more with a cyberpunk twist. *Observer* is set in Poland in 2084, where a digital plague has killed untold numbers of citizens with cybernetic implants. You play as Dan, a detective capable of jacking in to suspects' and victims' memories and fears via their implants.

I begin the demo investigating a rundown apartment complex, using Dan's augmented vision to look for clues. I talk with neighbors about the violence they had heard emanating from an apartment down the hallway. They tell me the couple often fought, but the husband didn't seem abusive. I enter the apartment and look around. The place is in shambles, with misplaced kitchenware and rotten food everywhere. It isn't long before I find a bloody trail leading to a man dying next to a bathtub. Dan reassures him but is honest, telling him he's dying, but that if he lets Dan jack into his memories, the police will catch the killer. The victim nods. Dan takes a needle with an extension cord from his arm and sticks it in the dying man's temple.

Suddenly I'm teleported to a labyrinthine version of the dying man's apartment. People are screaming. Something in the shadows moves. It's not human, I don't think. I proceed



along the corridors of the apartment. They twist and change, like an M.C. Escher drawing. I go right and find myself in the kitchen. Through a blood-stained window, I see a walkway suspended over the abyss. I can't see how to get to the walkway so I turn around, and suddenly the kitchen's given way completely and I'm on the walkway.

I continue forward, take a left into another room, and suddenly I'm falling again. I land in an interrogation room, my hands cuffed, sitting in a chair. Is this someone's memory? Was the dying man wanted by the police? Is this just a representation of guilt? The room shakes. The walls come down,

and I'm thrown back into the twisted, hellish apartment once more.

Like *Layers of Fear*, *Observer* seems to be a game of tricks and jump scares, but that doesn't make it a cheap or hollow experience. I got spooked in several places and was impressed with the bending level design and how effective *Observer* was at building its world within the 12-minute demo. *Minority Report* meets *Silent Hill* isn't something I knew I ever wanted – but now that I've played *Observer*, I cannot wait to see what developer Bloober does with this morbid vision of the future.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC
» **Style**
1-Player Adventure
» **Publisher**
Bloober Team
» **Developer**
Bloober Team
» **Release**
2017



You play a detective investigating a murder

Escape From Tarkov

A strong foundation for hardcore survival action

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(64-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
BattleState Games

» **Developer**
BattleState Games

» **Release**
2018

To say *Escape From Tarkov* is an ambitious game is an understatement. The first-person shooter/survival sim/MMORPG hybrid has been in alpha for the last few months, so we checked in to see how it's progressing. I watched a 30-minute demo during a GDC session and came away cautiously optimistic about BattleState Games' burgeoning shooter, which continues to draw in more users each month.

Escape From Tarkov casts you as a mercenary in a fictional war-torn city being fought over between two private military contractors, one funded by a multinational corporation and another controlled by the Russians. In addition, civilian scavengers caught in the middle have formed their own gangs. After siding with one of the contractors, you start battling mercenaries and scavengers played by other humans and A.I. If you die, you lose all

your equipment you haven't locked in a box somewhere, but you don't lose your character.

BattleState says its main emphasis is focusing on the hardcore, survivalist elements. Your HUD is practically nonexistent. There is no ammo counter initially, though you can get one by investing in certain skills properly. Your stamina is limited, and there are no crosshairs. Location-based damage on your body means that getting hit in the leg or arm slows you down. Battles are intense exchanges where you pray your shots hit their mark as enemy rounds kick up dust and splinter into walls.

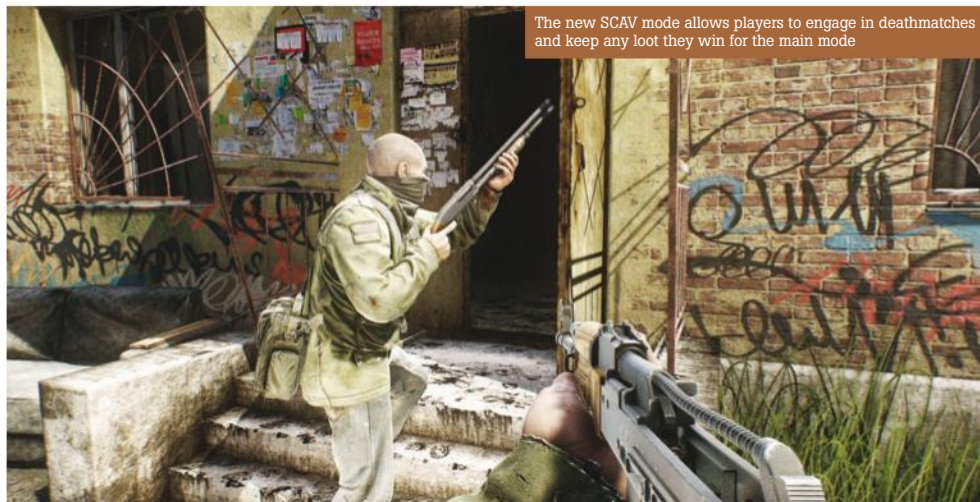
It's wise to be stealthy and quiet as possible so wandering enemies don't get the drop on you, though tactical options give you plenty of leeway to play as you want. You can slowly open doors to peek in and take a shot

or kick them down to surprise foes. Searching through cars and containers littered across the desolate cityscape can provide medical items you can use to bandage your body. You can also modify your weapons to make them fit your needs in a highly detailed menu screen once you have the materials.

Even in a year already filled with beautiful open-world games, *Escape from Tarkov* stands out. In BattleState's hands, the Unity engine creates impeccably detailed buildings, lush trees, and an incredible draw distance that lets you see locales you can visit and interact with in the distance in gorgeous detail. In the final release, players can explore the entirety of the game's massive map in a free- roam mode separate from the sectioned, escape-the-city story-mode segments.

Players can also load up Scav mode and take on other players with randomized gear in what's essentially *Tarkov*'s deathmatch component; any loot you win in that mode you get to transfer to your main character. The bit of Scav we watched was filled with tense gun battles among trees and in warehouses, with the randomized gear making the fights intriguing.

Escape From Tarkov is off to a promising start, but it's still only a start. In its current state, it only has three (albeit massive) areas to play through. Battlestate is aiming for a 2018 full release, though the alpha is available for those who preorder the game. As someone who's always fancied the survival sim genre, I was impressed by *Escape From Tarkov* and am hopeful about how the final game could turn out. » **Javy Gwaltney**



Tokyo Xanadu

Fighting monsters and making friends

Niche developer Falcom made its claim to fame with flagship franchises Ys and The Legend of Heroes. Tokyo Xanadu is its chance to break away and try something new. Hardcore fans might remember Falcom's classic Xanadu series, which was influential in the early days of the action/RPG genre. This new entry has roots in the old-school, but the connections are thin. Falcom's inspiration for Tokyo Xanadu was to try a different setting and feel.

Tokyo Xanadu takes place in a fictional suburb of modern Tokyo. You assume the role of everyday high-schooler and independent soul Kou Tokisaka. Kou would rather provide for himself by taking part-time jobs than relying on his parents, who are currently abroad. One night, Kou finds more than he bargains for when he comes across a transfer student named Asuka Hiiragi. Asuka is getting hassled by delinquent students, and when Kou tries to help, he discovers a sinister and lethal shadow world called the Eclipse. Apparently, an earthquake that occurred 10 years ago shook things up



more than everyone initially thought.

You split your time by dungeon-crawling through alternate dimensions to find answers and living your life as a regular kid – taking part-time jobs, attending school, and building friendships. The action combat is a little slower than Falcom's Ys series, but focuses more on exploiting enemy weaknesses and selecting the right fighter for situations. You can only control one character in a dungeon, but with a button press can swap to another combatant. All characters have unique fighting styles

and weapons that are tied to certain elements, making them more effective against certain creatures. In my brief demo, every character had a ranged and melee attack they could alternate between, all while building up a meter to unleash a special attack to change the tide of battle.

Tokyo Xanadu looks to have the fun combat Falcom is known for, while melding in some Persona-like social elements. Hopefully, it impresses on the same level as Falcom's previous efforts.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

- » **Platform**
PS4 • Vita
- » **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Aksys Games
- » **Developer**
Nihon Falcom
- » **Release**
Summer (Vita), Fall (PS4)

PS4 Vs. Vita

Tokyo Xanadu launches first on Vita this summer, but an enhanced version called Tokyo Xanadu EX+ is debuting on PS4 this fall. EX+ contains new monsters, dungeons, and modes alongside a brand-new playable character and new scenarios that flesh out characters.



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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

88 Persona 5

Being a high school student is tough. You need to study, navigate relationships, and dive into alternate dimensions to steal the corrupted hearts of people in power. That's just everyday life for the heroes of Persona 5, a complex and rewarding RPG that infuses its modern setting with classic turn-based mechanics and excellent storytelling. Explore dungeons, recruit demons, and fight for justice – all while managing your free time and making friends. With plenty of substance to back up its style, Persona 5 is a unique adventure at the top of its class.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	A 10 without the zero.

AWARDS

 PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
 GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
 SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
 GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Mass Effect: Andromeda

Adapting to harsh frontiers

8

Style 1-Player Action/Role-playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** BioWare **Release** March 21 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

BioWare's sci-fi RPG goes to a new galaxy with a new hero, mixing old and new concepts while still retaining the essence of Mass Effect

» Graphics

Great environments and galactic imagery paint a beautiful picture of the final frontier, but the character models and animations are inconsistent

» Sound

Voice performances are generally good, especially for the Ryder twins. The main musical theme is memorable, and the rest of the soundtrack serves its purpose without standing out

» Playability

Combat feels great, but a clunky interface can make basic navigation and upkeep a chore. Technical glitches are also plentiful, making the experience feel unpolished

» Entertainment

Mass Effect: Andromeda has the series' signature mixture of story, characters, and combat. Though its success rate varies in each area, it still provides dozens of hours of fun

» Replay Value

Moderately high

In the Mass Effect universe, the Andromeda Initiative is a bold and ambitious program. Looking for a future in uncharted territory, its volunteers leave the past behind and search for a new home in a faraway galaxy. However, despite all of the planning and preparation, cascading complications make it difficult for the Initiative to accomplish its mission beyond the Milky Way. In this way, Mass Effect: Andromeda is like the story it tells. It is a fresh start for the franchise and invigorated by a renewed sense of exploration, but a variety of problems prevent it from reaching its potential.

With Commander Shepard out of the picture, players control Ryder, a young explorer who inherits the role of Pathfinder – the one charged with finding humanity a home in Andromeda's Heleus Cluster. Ryder has just the right mixture of confidence and uncertainty, so you feel capable while improvising in strange situations. Whether you're brokering peace with a new race or uncovering alien technology, you and Ryder are figuring things out together. You make some tough calls along the way, but the focus isn't on choice and consequence this time, so just about any response can feel correct.

You and Ryder have a lot of work to do. All of the potential settlement worlds have catastrophic problems, the arks carrying the Milky Way's other races have gone missing, and the conquering kett race is waging war on the natives. These looming mysteries and threats provide a fantastic foundation for Andromeda's story; the opening 10

hours set the stage and build anticipation, and I could not wait to begin my Pathfinder duties in earnest.

By the 40-hour mark, the big questions like "Does Andromeda have habitable planets?" and "What do the kett want?" reach predictable conclusions. Seeing the story unfold is still cool, but you learn the Heleus Cluster isn't as full of mystery and novelty as you thought. For example, I like the designs of the new alien races, but they would look right at home in the Milky Way. Mass Effect fans are already used to bizarre creatures like krogan and hanar, and the new races don't push boundaries to fulfill the initial promise of encountering truly foreign life.

For the series that brought us adversaries like Saren and the Illusive Man, the primary foe in Andromeda is surprisingly boilerplate. He barely gets any screen time, and his goals are exactly what you would expect from an evil alien overlord. Your confrontation culminates in a confusing final mission in which everyone's lives are at stake, but I cannot tell you precisely how my actions were preventing disaster, which drains the tension and triumph from the ultimate victory.

The main story isn't the only way you learn about your surroundings, since Andromeda's other activities bear significant narrative weight. The open-world structure lets you pursue the stories you find interesting, putting you in charge of your journey into the unknown. These threads are where I found my favorite stories

in Andromeda, and I had trouble choosing which interesting tasks to tackle next. Should I track down the Initiative's missing arks, help the crew organize a movie night, or unlock the pieces of a mystery involving the Ryder family? Seemingly inconsequential filler like going around the map to place seismic hammers can lead to big surprises, encouraging you to leave no stone unturned. I even enjoy cruising between objectives in the Nomad, since it emphasizes how large and untamed the worlds are. Cresting a ridge after a long drive and seeing an alien landscape on the horizon and the ruins of an ancient civilization below you captures the essence of exploration in Andromeda.

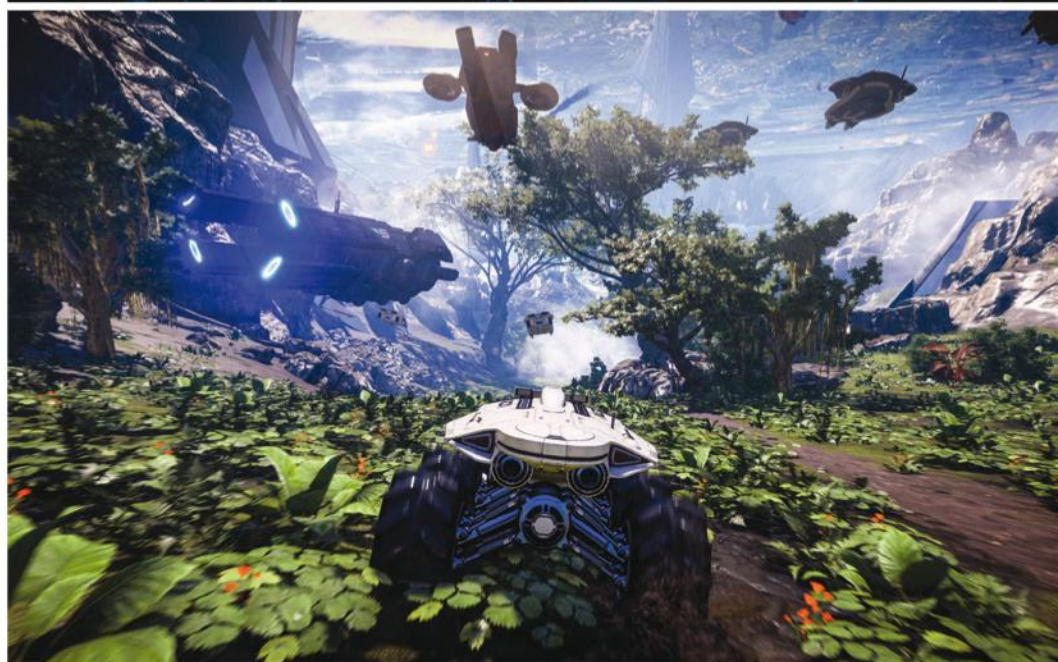
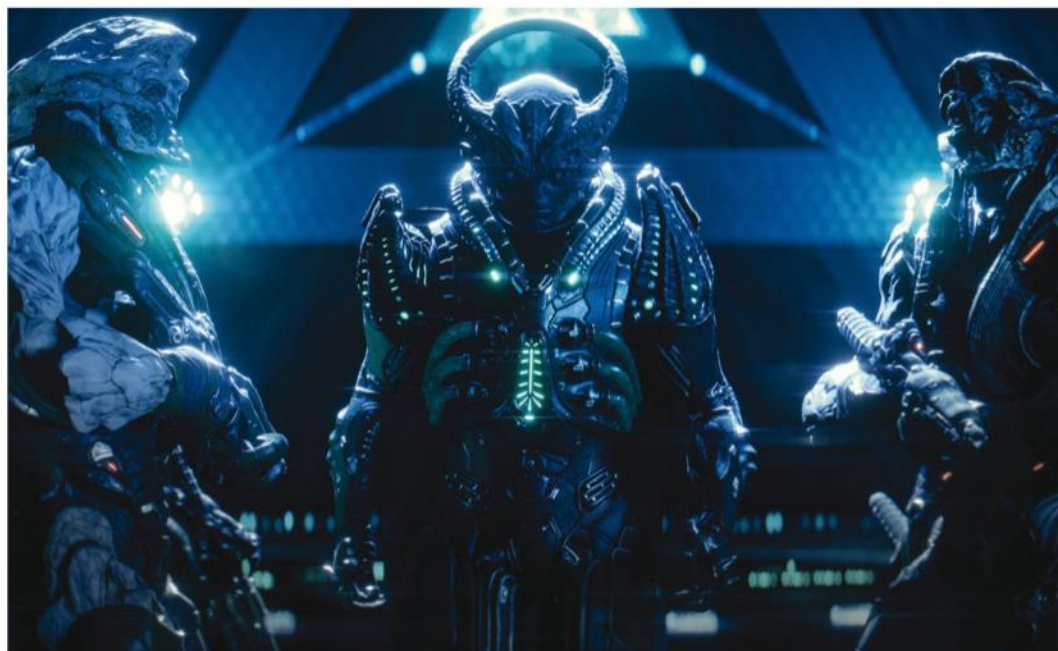
The wealth of content is impressive; you could probably get through the main story quickly, but I logged about 60 hours to see everything that interested me, a significant part of which was ally loyalty missions. Instead of one-off excursions, these are now full quest threads. They usually begin with a conversation, steer you toward objectives spanning a couple locations, then culminate in a mission of personal importance to the character. I love this approach to fleshing out the crew, because it feels more like developing a relationship. The loyalty missions contain some excellent exchanges and scenarios that I won't spoil here, but learning more about your teammates' backstories is satisfying. Though I have my favorite companions (Jaal and Drack), Andromeda's cast isn't as memorable as its predecessors' – though

that isn't as damning as it sounds considering the high bar BioWare set with those titles.

Andromeda compares most favorably to previous entries when the bullets and bionics start flying. This is the best combat has ever felt in the series. The controls are responsive, the action is fluid, and the focus on mobility leads to more dynamic encounters. You aren't just hunkering down under the same crate to shoot at distant foes; different enemy types keep you moving by flushing you out, at which point you dash and jump to a new location. Though the auto-cover can be frustratingly inconsistent, you are never in the same place for too long, and using a combination of powers and weapons to buy yourself breathing room leads to many thrilling moments.

While the battles are mechanically solid, the systems feeding into them don't scale well, and ultimately make your options feel limited. Ryder isn't restricted to a particular class, so you can choose from a broad array of combat, tech, and biotic skills. At first, I was dazzled by possibilities, like draining shields with Overload before tossing off a Pull-and-Throw combo to trigger a biotic explosion. I also like the concept of profiles, which provide different static bonuses depending on how you spend your skill points. However, with dozens of options, why you should invest in one power or profile over another is unclear, and your ability to experiment is constrained since you can only equip three powers at once. You can technically switch to other power/profile sets in mid-combat, but all of the powers need to cool down once you switch, which makes it an impractical solution – especially since you can only switch powers, not weapons. Combat is at its best when you pick a small range of abilities and passive bonuses and invest in them exclusively.

Fans of Mass Effect 3's multiplayer will also have a good time with Andromeda's online offering. It uses the same combat fundamentals as single-player, but like Mass Effect 3, it has more directed progression thanks to predetermined power sets. This keeps the action distilled to moment-by-moment survival as you fight off waves of increasingly difficult foes, ideally communicating with a team of capable squadmates. It generally works well (though I ran into some lag issues when playing on pre-release servers), and I like its unobtrusive ties to Ryder's main campaign. But like any multiplayer mode these days, its long-term success depends on BioWare's ability to optimize stability and provide a steady stream of new content to keep players engaged. I've had plenty of fun already, and I'm looking forward to diving deeper in the coming weeks.



Lurking beneath the ups and downs of the Andromeda's gameplay and story is a baffling network of technical issues, clunky menus, and unexplained systems. Finding and tracking your quests is needlessly complicated, crafting is a convoluted and multi-step affair that is rarely worth the hassle, and the limited inventory system has no reason to exist at all since you can't access your unequipped weapons and armor in the field. Stuttering framerates and audio bugs are frequent enough to be distracting. I also encountered a handful of bizarre animations, visual glitches, and broken quests that forced a reload at worst, so they didn't bother me as much as the other more persistent problems. However, all of this contributes to an overall lack of polish that

gives the impression various components are not fitting together properly.

When taken as its own journey (and not in comparison to Shepard's saga), Mass Effect: Andromeda is fun, and the important parts work. The narrative isn't astounding, but keeps you invested and drives you forward. The combat is entertaining whether you're in single-player or multiplayer. The crew isn't my favorite, but I like them and they have some good moments. Even with its other problems, these are the largest forces shaping your experience with Mass Effect: Andromeda, and they make it worth playing. At the same time, I was often left looking through a haze of inconveniences and dreaming about the game it could have been. » **Joe Juba**

Ghost Recon Wildlands

Embracing excess

8.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Bring Ghost Recon's signature tactical play into a vast open world built for cooperative play

» Graphics

From its snowy peaks and lush jungles to its picturesque lakes and arid salt flats, the breathtaking vistas of Bolivia are a sight to behold

» Sound

Don't expect to hear shots whiz by your head and make you jump; the sound design is no Battlefield. The overwrought dialogue between your operatives is laughable

» Playability

Strong tactical variety pairs well with adequate gunplay. The vehicle handling, on the other hand, could use the touch of a good mechanic

» Entertainment

A game best experienced with friends, Wildlands is a surprisingly long adventure that gives players a lot of tools for tactical experimentation.

Solo play is viable as well, but with by-the-books companion A.I., your strategic options are more limited

» Replay Value

Low

Where's The Multiplayer?

Ghost Recon games have always featured competitive play, but Wildlands skips this component out of the box in favor of focusing players on the expansive cooperative campaign. However, Ubisoft plans to release a free update in the near future that includes "tactical class-based 4v4 team combat."

Style 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Paris Release March 7 Rating M



Tom Clancy's fictional special forces operation is no stranger to adaptability. Over the course of the franchise's 15-year history, the interventionist Ghosts have stymied Russian ultranationalists, destabilized the North Korean army, and squelched a Mexican insurgency. For its latest major operation, Ubisoft throws a squad of fresh faces into the massive open world of Bolivia, tasking them with systematically dismantling the Mexican drug cartel that has turned the peaceful South American country into a cocaine-crazed narco-state.

After the U.S. embassy is bombed in the Bolivian capital and the resident DEA agent is kidnapped, the U.S. deploys a covert unit to disrupt the cartel's operations and take down the charismatic and powerful leader, El Sueño. You (and up to three friends) must gather intelligence to identify cartel members and team up with local rebels to carry out discrete missions that undermine its black market business. This is no overnight operation. With the cartel spread throughout 21 regions of the biggest open world I've seen in a shooter, expect to be here a while.

Once you identify a faction head of a region, disrupting the target's operation becomes the primary objective. Each boss serves a different role in the organization, which affords Wildlands a diverse array of missions. During my 50-plus hours of gameplay, I kidnapped a famous narco-corrido, destroyed submarines carrying cocaine to the United States and Europe, played cartel members against one another, and burned cocaine warehouses worth billions of dollars. The thematic diversity helps mask the fact that a large degree of

missions essentially boil down to clearing or infiltrating bases of various sizes.

Whether you are raiding a small base for new weapon parts or playing a story mission, Ghost Recon Wildlands shares many basic traits with its predecessors. The tactical combat rewards carefully planning your approach, making the drone your best friend. Identifying enemy positions, alarms, and mission targets opens a variety of strategic options for experimentation. This is where cooperative play shines.

With four players working in concert, you have so many possibilities at your disposal. Perhaps one Ghost drives into the base with a Santa Blanca vehicle, buying him or her enough cover to sneak past the front guard to disable the radar jammer and capture the target while the other players systematically eliminate the snipers perched in towers and guide him through the maze of enemies on the ground. Perhaps two Ghosts create a diversion, drawing enemies away from the warehouse you need to destroy while another Ghost skydives in with the C4.

The tactical creativity Wildlands enables is its biggest strength, but don't expect your plans to always succeed. The roaming Unidad forces may attack the cartel, rebels, or Ghosts at any given moment, making improvisation critical to surviving the messy skirmishes. You never know when Unidad is going to disrupt your covert attempts, and all hell breaks loose when they join the fray. I appreciated how this x-factor makes you think on your toes, but I came to hate how frequently they appeared out of nowhere.

Wildlands is clearly designed for cooperative play, but you can also

dismantle the cartel solo. Given the limitations of your control of A.I. companions, you can't split your team up to employ more complicated strategies, but if you upgrade the sync shot ability, they serve as a great tool for thinning the enemy herd before you go in guns blazing. They stay out of trouble for the most part, and come to your rescue if you take one too many bullets.

The biggest enemy in Wildlands isn't the cartel or Unidad, it's repetition. Each region breaks down into a handful of story missions and a checklist of weapons to gather, skill points to find, lore documents to reveal, and rebel side missions to complete to bolster their ability to support your efforts. By the tenth region or so, the process feels rote. I wish Ubisoft Paris better differentiated the tasks you need to complete in each region instead of giving you a cookie cutter to-do for each one.

Repetition creeps into story missions as well thanks to some rookie design mistakes. Many multi-part missions lack checkpoints, forcing you to complete the entire job from scratch if your plans go awry. Ubisoft Paris even replays cutscenes at the beginning of these missions, forcing you to skip ahead. Given the time it takes to complete Wildlands, the only antidote to the feeling of déjà vu is the creative approach you bring to the experience.

Repetitive gameplay loops aside, the cooperative tactical variety and vast open world make Ghost Recon Wildlands a singular experience unlike any other shooter on the market. Wildlands may not succeed with all its ambitions, but it's a compelling direction for the series that points to a fertile future. » **Matt Bertz**

Yooka-Laylee

Reviving a classic genre

Style 1 to 4-Player Platforming **Publisher** Team 17 **Developer** Playtonic Games **Release** April 11 **Rating** E10+

The video game industry was dominated by wisecracking mascot platformers for decades. Over time, that scene dried up, with few successful franchises remaining outside of Nintendo's established stable. Yooka-Laylee is a callback to the heyday of the 3D platformer, but through modernization, polish, and a whole lot of creativity, it successfully demonstrates that the genre is far from dead.

The setup is simple enough: The bad guy stole a magical book, and you need to retrieve it. That task falls upon the unlikely duo of Yooka, a bipedal chameleon, and Laylee, a small bat that rides on his back. Controlling these characters is easy, as the movement and platforming mechanics feel tight, whether you're jumping across platforms or spinning to take out enemies. The camera is solid most of the time, but has a tendency to get caught up on walls and pillars when the characters wind up in tight spaces.

The hunt for the book takes Yooka and Laylee to five distinct worlds. From a standard ice region housing a labyrinthine castle to an absurd outer space-infused pirate world, seeing where you go next is always a cool surprise. Each location holds two primary collectibles: Pagies, which grant access to new levels or expand upon existing ones, and Quills, a form of currency used to buy new abilities.

Quills are scattered everywhere, and are easy to snatch up. I liked trading them in to expand my arsenal of moves; some abilities earned late in the game even open new areas in previously explored worlds. That realization is always exciting, but the ability pool dries up too soon, meaning unless you want to be a completionist who hunts for all 1,010 Quills, the collection mechanic serves no value in the late game.

Pagies play a larger role in story progression, and thus require you to complete objectives to obtain them. The missions they are tied to vary wildly, from racing a cute cloud character to transforming Yooka and Laylee into objects like an attack helicopter or a school of piranha to complete special tasks. I love the creativity of these challenges, and the thrill that accompanied each clever or difficult objective. With 145 Pagies spread across worlds and hub area, I was never at a loss of things to do – this is



a long game.

Fun homages to the genre's history are scattered everywhere. You encounter things like mine cart missions similar to those found in various Donkey Kong Country games, as well as a polygonal dinosaur named Rextro Sixtyfour, who lets you play arcade-style minigames like a top-down kart racer and a lane-based auto-runner. These are good ways to earn a handful of Pagies during the story, but they boil down to little more than a quick nostalgic detour.

Each world also contains a unique boss battle. These encounters challenge you in ways no other sequence in the adventure does. I don't want to spoil the battles, but I enjoyed every one of them to the point where it's difficult to pick a favorite. Unfortunately, some of the battles are difficult to find; two of them are even hidden behind seemingly inconsequential side missions.

Exploration is a large part of Yooka-Laylee. As soon as you enter a world, you wander around trying to find things to collect. I had a blast branching from one area to the next, and the excitement that comes from discovering a secret area is unrivaled by anything else in this game. While the exploration-based structure works to the game's advantage the vast majority of the time, its insistence on not including modern conventions like waypoints or maps can lead to

long stretches of running around in circles trying to find the next mission to complete.

The gameplay and structure lay the nostalgia on thick, but even those parts of Yooka-Laylee pale in comparison to the narrative. Whenever characters speak, the onscreen text is accompanied by grunting sounds like those found in Banjo-Kazooie. This is a charming callback at first, but when you're out in the hub world and the main villain begins taunting you repeatedly, it becomes annoying.

Yooka-Laylee liberally shatters the fourth wall by acknowledging its own existence as a game. Each time dialogue happened between characters, I eagerly awaited jokes about other games. You even get herded through quiz-style sequences; thankfully, these don't serve as roadblocks as much as they do fun allusions to games like Banjo-Kazooie. I laughed out loud at these silly references on multiple occasions, and some of the fun story moments are just as amusing as the gameplay.

Though camera problems and outdated level design are present at times, the moments of exhilaration, discovery, and satisfaction far outweigh those pitfalls. It feels like ages since I've played something like Yooka-Laylee. This is a game that was built for those who look back with fondness on the classics that spawned it, and in that regard, it delivers completely. » **Brian Shea**

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

A modern-facing return to the glory days of 3D platformers like Banjo-Kazooie and Super Mario 64

» Graphics

The bright and colorful visuals are not only appropriate to the genre, but also pleasant to look at

» Sound

While the delightful soundtrack is a highlight, the nostalgic grunts quickly wear on you

» Playability

Whether jumping, gliding, or using one of the various unlockable abilities, navigating the world is simple to do

» Entertainment

Full of fun exploration, exciting encounters, and tons of collectibles, Yooka-Laylee is a modern take on a classic genre

» Replay Value

Moderately high

Adding Adventurers

Though Yooka-Laylee is largely a single-player game, you can play multiplayer in a couple of different ways. If you connect an extra controller during the main adventure, the second player controls a cursor that can pick up items onscreen. Even though this is an option, it is largely inconsequential. In addition, up to four players can jump into various arcade-style minigames.

Persona 5

The triumph of thievery

9.25



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Atlus Developer Atlus Release April 4 Rating M

PS4 • PS3

» Concept

Reform society by fighting demons and making evil people confess their crimes. But don't forget to keep your grades up and make friends

» Graphics

They may not be detailed, but the visuals are incredibly stylish and attractive. Even the victory screens and shop menus look amazing

» Sound

A fantastic soundtrack from composer Shoji Meguro is packed with music that will get stuck in your head

» Playability

Exploration and combat controls are straightforward and smooth. I especially like how each battle command has its own button, so you aren't scrolling through too many menu options

» Entertainment

Persona 5's well-crafted story, exciting combat, and deep systems make it my favorite entry in the series – and the best Japanese RPG in years

» Replay Value

Moderate



The first few hours of Persona 5 feel like settling in with the opening chapters of a massive novel. Even though you don't know the characters well or understand where the plot is going, you can feel the weight behind the narrative like hundreds of pages waiting to be read. As new threads and mechanics are introduced, that depth and sense of intent persist, and Persona 5 takes the requisite time to do its many ambitions justice. The result is an uncommonly complex and satisfying RPG in terms of both story and gameplay, and when you factor in its impeccable stylishness, Persona 5 is hard to put down.

Players step into the daily life of a taciturn (but not totally silent) high-school student and divide their time between self-improvement, building friendships, and fighting evil in otherworldly dungeons. The basic structure may be familiar to fans, but Persona 5 builds on it with an intriguing premise and fantastic cast.

You lead a group called the Phantom Thieves, supernatural tricksters who enter an alternate world to steal hearts – a phrase that boils down to making high-profile villains see the error of their ways and confess their crimes. It's a great hook, and because Persona 5

doesn't rush things, you get the satisfaction of seeing your ragtag group gradually emerge from the shadows and get more notorious as you recruit more members and pull off bigger heists. This involves infiltrating "palaces," dungeons that represent a person's perceptions – like a gym teacher who sees the school as his castle where he is free to treat students like slaves. Selecting your targets, uncovering their perceptions, and dealing with the fallout from your thefts are major aspects of the story I won't ruin. I will say that the scenarios are clever and surprising, and artfully deal with complicated themes like freedom, identity, and pride. I especially like how these smaller arcs steadily rise and fall to provide bursts of narrative payoff that propel you through the larger tale.

All players experience the core exploits of the Phantom Thieves, but Persona 5 has a layer of self-directed story that is even better. When you aren't taking down corrupt villains, you are managing your days in a simulation of student life in modern-day Tokyo. I love the process of optimizing my time and seeing the progress in my stats and relationships; you can fill your day with things like part-time jobs, video games, fishing, or deepening your bonds with

your friends. That last one is the most important and rewarding, since the resulting scenes answer questions about the backstories and motivations of the people around you. Why is one of your teachers working a second job? Why is the Phantom Thieves' biggest fan so obsessed? The cast of characters is wonderful, easily meeting the bar set by previous installments. I even found the animal mascot tolerable, which was a pleasant surprise. I was slightly less attached to the main party characters here compared to Persona 4, but the supporting cast is better, evening out the experience as a whole.

The structure lets you focus on the people and activities that interest you most, and you can rest assured that any choice you make has benefits. How all of Persona 5's pieces fit together and feed into each other is great. Stat increases (like the one you receive from finishing a burger-eating challenge) might open up more advanced ranks in your bond with a friend, which in turn could provide bonuses like shop discounts or increased experience. My favorite rewards are the ones that feed into the social aspects, like paying to raise your affinity with any character, or getting back your evening time slot after spending the day in a dungeon.



Amassing a variety of combat bonuses for your party is also valuable, like auto-healing status ailments or delivering extra attacks.

As important as the social and story elements are, Persona 5 is still a turn-based RPG, which means you spend a lot of time fighting through palaces. The traditional battle system has characters using their Personas (which are like guardian spirits) against an army of monsters, with an emphasis on exploiting weaknesses. Using buffs and debuffs to set up a big offensive push is a rush, and the cool baton pass ability – which lets you pass your turn off to an ally after hitting a weakness – means you aren't just selecting the same actions every turn. I'm not a fan of the negotiation system for acquiring new Personas, but fusing the monsters is a fun and engaging way to let players experiment with new abilities. Even so, you are likely to do some grinding to keep your XP and money levels comfortable, which means a sense of repetition settles in sooner or later – at least until you finish your current stage and move on to the next palace.

The palaces are deliberately crafted, not randomly generated. This is a noteworthy evolution for the series, but within the larger RPG landscape, their designs still feel outdated. I appreciate the attempts to add dimension by letting players jump on top of some objects and hide behind others, but they aren't consistent enough. You run through many flat, boxy corridors, and rarely encounter obstacles beyond simple puzzles and locked doors. Don't interpret that to mean the palaces aren't impressive in other ways; I love their visual and thematic executions tied to their owners' twisted desires, but the act of exploring them is the least interesting part of the game.

My other complaints about Persona 5 are few. Given the acclaim Persona 4 received, I can understand Atlus' desire to stick to a proven formula. However, sometimes Persona 5 goes beyond giving you more of a good thing; some

parts feel outright copied from the last game, with new characters occupying old roles. That won't matter if you're new to the series (Persona 5 is a great place to start, by the way), but I was disappointed to see this entry return to the well for character concepts like "high-school detective prodigy" and "gruff-but-likable father-figure," not to mention the whole "dungeons represent their owners' psyches" conceit. These things are still handled well, but

stand out in a field of concepts that are otherwise fresh.

All of these ideas – old and new – are tied together with a cohesive and pervasive sense of style that is impossible to ignore. What Persona 5 lacks in graphical detail it more than makes up for in art direction, with all of the visual and audio elements polished to a brilliant sheen. Everything from the flashy menus to the mesmerizing soundtrack establishes an atmosphere that fits the vibe perfectly, lending the Phantom Thieves a slick and stylish mystique.

If the opening hours of Persona 5 are like starting a massive novel, then the closing hours are like finishing one, complete with the bittersweet finality of turning the last page. But it also carries an immense sense of satisfaction. After 100 hours of playing, all of my big questions were answered. I understood the characters, I knew my way around the world, and I had fun almost every step of the journey. You become a resident of Persona 5 the more you play it, and it has the rare ability to transport in a way few games can. » **Joe Juba**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version of Persona 5. The game is also available on PlayStation 3



The Elder Scrolls: Legends

Success is in the cards

8.25

PC

» Concept

Engage in short card battles with characters and artifacts from The Elder Scrolls universe

» Graphics

They're not bad, but some of the units look like generic fantasy tropes that fail to capture the franchise flavor

» Sound

Each carefully quipped phrase and card callout fits the universe well

» Playability

Easy to pick up and play. The extended tutorial, campaign, and single-player arena experience give new players plenty of time to soak the game in before challenging other human minds

» Entertainment

A nice addition to the current crop of digital card games and absolutely worth a try if you're fan of the genre

» Replay Value

High

Style 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) Publisher Bethesda Softworks Developer Dire Wolf Digital Release March 9 Rating T

The Elder Scrolls: Legends takes the legendary faces, races, and places of The Elder Scrolls series and transports them into a card-game format, where Dragon Priests battle Khajiit thieves and Wabbajacks can add an unpredictable element to any encounter. With five distinct attributes to explore and some features that prevent the game from being another Hearthstone or Magic: The Gathering clone, Legends is a polished, enjoyable experience.

The game board of ES:L is arranged into two lanes, the normal and the shadow. Everything happens normally on the standard lane, but units deployed to the shadow lane operate under the cloak of darkness for a turn, and can't be attacked by enemy units. Lanes allow you to play units that are more fragile or need time to set up with some safety, and add an element of strategy to things instead of just dumping all your critters in one giant pool.

A more interesting mechanic is called prophecy, found on a variety of cards. Each time you're attacked and lose health at increments of five, you'll draw the top card of your deck. The additional card resource is nice, but if it turns out that top card has the prophecy ability, you can play it instantly for free, allowing you to potentially

turn the tide of battle. Prophecy cards often cost a little bit more magicka to play normally, but can give you a huge advantage when played for free, and this mechanic is especially useful to take on aggressive decks that attempt to destroy you in just a few turns.

Cards are divided into five attributes like Strength, Intelligence, and Willpower, and you can use cards from any two attributes in a given deck. Each attribute feels unique and flavorful – Agility sports plenty of pilfering Khajiit that get stronger each time they attack an opponent, Endurance seeks to win the long game with resource dominance, Strength commands brute force and a focus on weaponry, and so on.

Players select an avatar and then venture through a variety of game modes. You can change your avatar at any time, and it's more than just a visual – your "random" card rewards will be influenced by your race. Card-game veterans will gravitate toward ladder-climbing through the ranks of each ranked season and the arena, ES:L's form of limited/draft play.

The arena mode is the most interesting and enjoyable part of ES:L; picking an attribute combination to form a class, like assassin or battle mage, and then trying to build the perfect deck from a random selection of cards is challenging and engaging. The

arena ruleset can even change during events, such as the Sheogorath-sponsored Chaos Arena, which adds amusing quirks and shifting rules.

ES:L is welcoming to genre newcomers, offering a substantial single-player campaign that comes with many rewards. Though the solo experience won't win any awards for storytelling, it functions as an adept tutorial that gives players all the tools they will need to succeed in multiplayer encounters. In addition to the campaign, those looking for more tutelage can participate in a single-player arena experience, which functions as a great way to start gauging card values and combinations before putting your hard-earned gold on the line against live opponents.

Perhaps ES:L's biggest weakness is that it plays things just a little bit too safe with many familiar features and mechanics alongside its own contributions, and may have a hard time carving out its own identity in a sea of competitive digital card games.

Elder Scrolls: Legends is a solid addition to the CCG lineup, and an excellent choice for those looking for something a little different. While the cards don't really call out the feeling of exploring Morrowind or shouting at dragons, the game itself is solid enough to stand on its own mechanics.

» Daniel Tack



Thimbleweed Park

A love letter to a bygone era



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Terrible Toybox Developer Terrible Toybox Release March 30 Rating T

8.5

Xbox One • PC
Mac • Linux

Spiritual successors are abundant in video games, and often developers hope to deliberately evoke nostalgia to remind us of the old days. Thimbleweed Park, a point-and-click adventure game from the co-creators of 1987's *Maniac Mansion*, rides on that modern sensation, but has enough of a modern touch to feel fresh. The developers know the past wasn't always better, as it mends the flaws of classic adventure games with more logical puzzles, while still being a love letter to a bygone era. It is an enthralling, quirky game that genre enthusiasts can appreciate, but remains inviting enough for modern audiences.

Thimbleweed Park stars two FBI agents, a rookie paired with a veteran, investigating a murder in a small town. Set in the fictional Thimbleweed County in 1987, strange happenings occur as often as they would in *Twin Peaks*, from the whisper of "signals" in the nighttime to rumors of a conspiracy relating to a wealthy family. As the story unfolds, you play through flashbacks that unlock additional characters in present day. Once they are all unlocked, you switch between five drastically different protagonists, such as a foul-mouthed clown and a ghost looking for redemption. Seeing how Thimbleweed's inhabitants interact with one another is fun, and so are their reactions to the world around them.

Thimbleweed County is large, with an open-world feel as you use a town map to visit places like a rundown circus and a hotel hosting a comic convention. Exploring each area is fascinating, but as the game opened up, I sometimes felt directionless with the overwhelming number of areas to consider when solving puzzles.

Although billed as a throwback adventure, Thimbleweed Park is much more than that. It plays like a modern *Maniac Mansion*, with a list of clickable verbs at the bottom of the screen used to interact with objects and characters. The verb list is a clunky design abandoned by most modern adventure games, but it feels at home in this homage. Developer Terrible Toybox is aware of the shortcomings of classic adventure games, and the verb list can feel both ironic and creative in certain situations. For example, a ghost character has a unique set of verbs granting him special abilities, while other actions like "despair" have no use outside of making him voice morbid complaints.



With two difficulty settings, hard and casual, Thimbleweed Park mends the flaws of older adventure games without sacrificing the charm. Hard mode features clever, multi-step puzzles that can be difficult to solve but are rarely obtuse. Listening to dialogue cues, such as a reporter mentioning that she is waiting for a call, can nudge you in the right direction. In casual mode, puzzles have streamlined solutions, removing specific steps such as no longer requiring a combination to open a safe. This makes the game feel shorter, but makes puzzles easier and more approachable.

Some puzzles are character specific, while others require multiple characters to solve, such as teaming up to disrupt a radio station's broadcast or throwing an item into a sewer grate to aid a kidnapped character. These logical multi-step puzzles are where Thimbleweed Park shines most. However, inventory management between protagonists can be tedious, since you need the characters to be in the same location in order to exchange items.

Thimbleweed County is a strange place, with even stranger townsfolk who entice you with their bizarre but captivating personalities. I enjoyed warming up to a ghost tasked with scaring people in an elevator, and realizing the sheriff, coroner, hotel manager, and others all oddly seem like the same person except for slight dialect changes. Details like these make Thimbleweed Park an excellent comedic experience, enhanced by self-aware humor poking fun at the genre (including many nods to old LucasArts adventures). Gags like using Ron Gilbert as a fake name to check into a hotel are endearing and pleasant surprises.

Metafictional satire is one of Thimbleweed Park's stronger points, but Terrible Toybox overuses clever jabs pointing out genre tropes over the course of the game. This muddles up the main storyline later on and creates plot holes, warping other aspects of the narrative to feel meaningless. At its best, Thimbleweed shakes things up in creative ways, building on its classic foundation and veering off in surprising directions; it asks you to leave the game to search elsewhere in order to solve a puzzle, and prompts you to save your progress before pushing a button that results in a game over. The latter is a brilliant, satirical take on dead-ends in adventure games, which Thimbleweed Park adamantly avoids.

Thimbleweed Park revels in its humor, and succeeds in its efforts toward better puzzle design. The narrative takes some twists and turns that didn't always hit home with me, but I enjoyed the whimsical journey nonetheless. With its stellar characters and smart puzzles, Thimbleweed Park is a joy to play from beginning to end. » **Elise Favis**

» Concept

Attempt to solve a murder and a string of conspiracies by completing puzzles as five different characters

» Graphics

The pixelated graphics are evocative of an older era, while also looking crisp and colorful

» Sound

An ominous and suspenseful soundtrack adds to the mysterious atmosphere of each location

» Playability

You interact with characters and solve puzzles by clicking a list of verbs at the bottom of the screen, which feels archaic in design but appropriate for an old-school homage

» Entertainment

Thimbleweed Park is endlessly entertaining, with clever humor and several references to classic adventure games

» Replay Value

Moderately high



5 Super Bomberman R

Platform Switch **Release** March 3 **Rating** E10+

With a skippable story mode, a poorly implemented in-game currency system, and shallow multiplayer offerings, Super Bomberman R is not worth your time. It's a better multiplayer game than a single-player game, but it's not a particularly good multiplayer game either.

— **Brian Shea**



8.25 Snipperclips: Cut It Out, Together

Platform Switch **Release** March 3 **Rating** E

Cutting your player character down to either match a particular shape or form a tool needed to achieve a solution is gratifying from the moment you hear the clipping sound. This simplicity makes Snipperclips an enjoyable puzzler from start to finish.

— **Brian Shea**

4 1-2-Switch

Platform Switch **Release** March 3 **Rating** E10+

1-2-Switch is the bizarre world incarnation of Wii Sports – a bush-league collection of gimmicks that fails spectacularly at selling the new capabilities of Nintendo's hybrid console. You may still throw your Switch controller at your TV, but for entirely different reasons.

— **Jeff Marchiafava**

8.75 Robo Recall

Platform Rift **Release** March 1 **Rating** NR

Robo Recall doesn't feel like a tech demo or minuscule offering of a promising concept. It's the only VR game I've walked away from thinking I was satisfied with the amount and variety of content available. Its brand of action is unique and entertaining, and I haven't played anything like it before.

— **Javy Gwaltney**

7.25 The Golf Club VR

Platform Rift, Vive **Release** February 24 **Rating** NR

Apart from the laudable gameplay and the sheer volume of courses available, the game lacks a career mode, structure, or any alternate modes. This does not detract from the gameplay, but leaves the Golf Club VR in between clubs with a par on the horizon.

— **Matthew Kato**

8.25 Stories Untold

Platform PC **Release** February 28 **Rating** NR

Stories Untold is a four-hour experience that both horror fans and those who love to dissect head-scratching enigmas should check out. Though a number of frustrating puzzles may prove too tiresome for many, those who stick with it are rewarded with a treasure trove of gruesome and morbid delights.

— **Javy Gwaltney**

7.5 Flinthook

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** April 18 **Rating** E

Grappling around each room and deftly making split-second moves still makes me feel nimble in a way other platformers don't. The feeling of finally defeating a boss after several failed runs is a reward worth chasing, even if you can't pursue it for too long.

— **Suriel Vazquez**



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PC

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Battlefield 1	9.25	Dec-16
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Civilization VI	9.5	Dec-16
Dead Rising 4	8.75	Feb-17
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For Honor	8.25	Apr-17

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Shantae: Half-Genie Hero	7.75	Mar-17
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3DS

Pokémon Sun & Moon	8.5	Jan-17
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VITA

Shantae: Half-Genie Hero	7.75	Mar-17
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iOS

Fire Emblem Heroes	7.25	Apr-17
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PLAYSTATION VR

Resident Evil 7 Biohazard	8.5	Mar-17
Batman: Arkham VR	7.5	Dec-16

STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com
Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com
Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Senior Associate Editor
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Associate Editors
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Javy Gwaltney javy@gameinformer.com
Elise Favis elisefavis@gameinformer.com
Suriel Vazquez surielvazquez@gameinformer.com

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com
Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designers
Samm Langer samm@gameinformer.com
Jen Vinson jen@gameinformer.com
Web Designers/Programmers
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Wade Wojcik wadewojcik@gameinformer.com
Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpath paul@gameinformer.com
Senior Product Manager
Lisa Wagner lisa@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES
Associate Publisher
Rob Borm rob@gameinformer.com
Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com
Senior Advertising Sales Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com
Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com
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BIG AMBITION, BIG PAYOFF

by Kimberley Wallace

Looking back at how Dragon Quest VIII took the series to new heights

Since its inception over 30 years ago, Dragon Quest has revealed in its simplicity. The iconic series is held in high regard for establishing a basic template that many RPGs would follow, with its turn-based battles and world exploration. The series already has 10 numbered entries and several spins-offs to show for it, and Dragon Quest XI is currently on the horizon for PlayStation 4, Switch, and 3DS. Time will tell how that entry fares, but no DQ game raised the bar in terms of scope like Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King on the PS2. Launched back in 2005, the game is widely regarded as the series' best offering, earning an 89 on Metacritic and becoming the biggest-selling PS2 game of all time in Japan. We chatted with creator Yuji Horii to reminisce about development, learn what went into its recent rebirth on 3DS, and discover what he hopes the long-running franchise can do in the future.

Dragon Quest VIII marked a lot of firsts for the series. This was the first entry to be in a 3D world, using

cel-shaded visuals. It also marked the first collaboration with developer Level-5, best known for Dark Cloud and later Ni No Kuni. Level-5 would go on to help with Dragon Quest IX, but Horii now handles the series with his own company, Armor Project, which has an exclusive production contract with Square Enix.

Up until this point, the Dragon Quest games hadn't featured voice acting, leaving much up to the imagination. However, when Dragon Quest VIII was

localized for the West, Square finally included a voice track. British voice actors were used since the world of Dragon Quest is based on medieval European fantasy. Horii says the decision to include voice acting was done to give you a "deeper sense of the world," and he thinks it helped the series leave an impression on markets outside of Japan.

The voice acting brought characters to life, injecting more personality and humor into the experience. "One of my favorite gags is where King Trode shows up suddenly and Yangus says his catchphrase, 'Cor blimey,'" Horii recalls. Dragon Quest VIII's cast still



remains one of the most popular to date, appearing in a slew of spinoffs from *Dragon Quest Heroes* to *Fortune Street*. Fans loved the dense bandit Yangus, the feisty princess Jessica, the suave Angelo, and the wisdom-imparting King Trode, to name a few. “Each character has unique and strong personalities, and each characters’ background and upbringing is highlighted as you progress through the story, so I think that makes it easy to feel for the characters,” Horii says.

What remains most impressive is still *Dragon Quest VIII*’s grandiose world. The ambition and scope of it was rare for 3D games at the time. “If you can see a mountain in the distance, you can run to that mountain and climb up it,” Horii says. “Nowadays, this is pretty commonplace technology, but when *Dragon Quest VIII* was first released, this was groundbreaking.”

While *Dragon Quest VIII* isn’t what we define as an open-world game, it had elements reminiscent of them. Horii wanted players to feel compelled to explore at their own leisure, but also didn’t want them to overwhelm them with so much freedom that they wouldn’t know what to do. “I thought that laying out the story as a guiding path would make it possible to adventure and have fun in the world,” Horii explains. “While we have provided that path, we also intended for it to be possible to diverge from the path and enjoy the game freely.”

While Horii is known for his more simplistic storytelling style, *DQVIII* still had a lot to unpack for a plot merely involving a baddie spreading evil throughout the world. Most players complete *Dragon Quest VIII* in anywhere from 90 to 100 hours. At the time, it was rare for console games to be this dense, especially in terms of a critical path. *Dragon Quest VIII* was packed with extra activities as well, such as recruiting monsters, battling in the monster arena, and gambling at the casino. The world was so vast you also had various ways to get around it, from mounting a sabrecat to sailing your own ship.

This PS2 game also introduced the tension system, which allowed you to stock power and unleash a deadly strike. This became make-or-break in boss battles, and would go on to be a staple of combat strategy. Horii also added his own wrinkle to the system, creating a memorable animation to go with it. “I came up with the idea of occasionally but not always entering Super High Tension when building up tension,” he recalls. “Will you be able to go Super by spending another turn to build tension? Or will you end up wasting a turn? I thought that sense of excitement was great. As for the visuals when that happened, the Super Saiyan [from *Dragon Ball Z*] transformation



was perfect for the effect, so I borrowed that visual concept.”

Another popular element was the alchemy pot. Nowadays, crafting is commonplace, but when *Dragon Quest VIII* launched, it wasn’t as widespread. While you were exploring the world, you could put various items in the pot and see what mixing them together would net you. “I wanted to come up with an alchemy system that relied on your intuition, so you would wonder what you could make by combining two different things,” Horii says. “We started with the simple idea of combining two herbs to get a better herb, and expanded it from there. It feels great to do a lot of damage with a weapon you built yourself.”

Over a decade after its initial release, *Dragon Quest VIII* came to 3DS this year with enhancements such as different endings, a photo mode, and new party members. “To develop the Nintendo 3DS version, we analyzed play feedback from users and development

staff, then added in the characteristics of the 3DS hardware to come up with ideas for additional elements and changes and then decide on the ones to pursue,” Horii says. This meant eliminating random encounters and making the menus easier to navigate.

As for the future, Horii wants to continue creating the *Dragon Quest* in the same spirit. He thinks the draw of the series is “experiencing a life different from your own,” and he’s happy to create virtual worlds where you can live these different adventures. “This concept hasn’t changed from the time we created the original *Dragon Quest*,” he says. “The hardware, however, keeps evolving, and there have been huge advances in the technology to realize these worlds. People can have more and more realistic experiences in games. What I would like to aim for next is a fusion of the virtual and the real. It would be amazing if I could make a game that would improve the player’s real life as well.” ♦

How Old Are They Now?

Video game characters are real (technically imaginary) people, too. As such, they age just like we do. Not all of them have canonical birthdays, but we rounded up a collection of a few that do in order to get a sense of how old they are in 2017. **by Kyle Hilliard**



Dante

(Devil May Cry)
Current age: 44

In the original game, we learn Dante lost his mother 20 years ago when he was eight years old. It's safe to assume the game takes place in the year it was released (2001) based on the modern American setting, with Dante being 28 years old. Fast-forward to 2017, and Dante is now a responsible adult with a mortgage. He may even have a teenage son.



Blanka

(Street Fighter)
Current age: 51

According to Blanka's in-game bio, he was born on February 12, 1966. He used to go by Jimmy before misunderstanding the "blank" field on the name change form. In 2017, he is 51 years old, but he doesn't look a day over... whatever would be a reasonable compliment for a green-skinned, orange-haired man.



Solid "David" Snake

(Metal Gear Solid)
Current age: 45

Solid Snake was "born" in 1972. A product of the Les Enfants Terribles project, he tried really hard to enter early retirement at 23 following 1995's Outer Heaven incident, but it didn't work. After the events of Metal Gear Solid 4 in 2014, he finally met his retirement goal, but thanks to Werner Syndrome, he looks decades beyond his true age.



Joanna Dark

(Perfect Dark)
Current age: 17

Joanna was born in Atlanta, Georgia on March 18, 2000, meaning today she is only 17 years old – slightly younger than the recommended age for international secret agents. The events of Perfect Dark Zero will begin in three years, and three years after that, Perfect Dark will begin. She's probably training as we speak.



Kaitlin Greenbriar

(Gone Home)
Current age: 43

Based on Gone Home's plot summary, we know it was 1995 when a 21-year-old Kaitlin Greenbriar returned home to root through her family's personal belongings. Today, she would be 43 years old. Kaitlin is now old enough to own a home that her own confused children can rummage through to discover secrets about their siblings.



Lara Croft

(Tomb Raider)
Current age: 49

The original Lara Croft was born on Valentine's day in 1968. She is certainly still capable of exploring, but it might be time to at least consider putting some of that discovered treasure into a mutual fund and prepare for retirement. The newest version of Lara Croft, from the 2013 reboot, was born in 1992, making her 25 years old today.



Gordon Freeman

(Half-Life)
Current age: 35-44

Gordon Freeman's exact age is difficult to pin down, but we know he was 27 during the events of Half-Life. Unfortunately, the time-frame for the Black Mesa incident is broad, taking place sometime between 2000 and 2009. With that data, we can assume Gordon was born sometime between 1973 and 1982 making him between 35 and 44 today.



Adam Jensen

(Deus Ex)
Current age: 24

We've got 12 years until the events of Deus Ex: Human Revolution begin, and then two years after that we'll get a chance to experience Mankind Divided firsthand. Jensen was born March 9, 1993 (he shares a birthday with *The Force Awakens'* Oscar Isaac). Today, he's just out of college paying his dues in the Detroit police department.

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